

LETTERS FROM SUSAN:

**A Woman's View of the
Russian Mennonite Experience (1928-1941)**

Edited and Translated by John B. Toews

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Bethel College
North Newton, Kansas
1988

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Russian Mennonite Experience
(1928-1941)
John B. Toews

Series Preface

Bethel College, in cooperation with the Mennonite Library and Archives, inaugurated the Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series in 1987 as part of the college's centennial celebration. Wedel, first president of Bethel College from the beginning of classes in 1893 until his death in 1910, was an early scholar of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. His four-volume survey of Mennonite history, published from 1900 to 1904, helped to rescue Anabaptist-Mennonitism from its marginal and denigrated portrayal in standard church history works. Wedel saw Anabaptist-Mennonitism as part of a tradition of Biblical faithfulness going back to the early church. He strove to see his people not in isolation, but as a part of God's wider plan in world history. The Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series features research in both Anabaptist and Mennonite history.

Nearly sixty years ago the Mennonite Historical Society of the Mennonite Church launched its series, *Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History*, with Harold S. Bender's, *Two Centuries of American Mennonite Literature: A Bibliography of Mennonitica Americana, 1727-1928*, as volume one in 1929. The society announced four more volumes planned for 1929 and 1930, and in 1984 C. Arnold Snyder's *The Life and Times of Michael Sattler*, was published as volume twenty-seven. Volume twenty-eight, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements, A Community Paradigm*, by Beulah Stauffer Hostetler was published in 1987. The Historical Committee of the General Conference Mennonite Church initiated its Mennonite Historical Series twenty years after the Mennonite Church commenced its series with the publication in 1949 of *From the Steppes to the Prairies*, edited by Cornelius Krahn. In 1988 Faith and Life Press published *James Liu and Stephan Wang: Christians True in China*, edited by Robert S. Kreider, and *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, edited by Wilma McKee, as volumes fifteen and sixteen respectively.

The Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series supplements these two earlier series through the publication of relatively small press runs of significant books with more specialized and, therefore, possibly more limited audiences. Bethel College, chartered a century ago this spring, had a founding vision to promote the

liberal arts through the cultivation of the intellect in all fields of knowledge and to serve the church through the preservation of Mennonite values and preparation for service. The publications in the Wedel series hope to further these goals by making available several hundred copies of books at reasonable prices using the recently developed computer technology for desk-top publishing with laser printers. The number of copies printed will be largely based upon prepublication orders in order to avoid other overhead costs. Suggestions, as well as manuscripts, for the Wedel series are welcome.

David A. Haury
Series Editor

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FORWARD

Politics

When Susan Toews of Ohrloff, Molotschna, began writing to her brother Gerhard in Canada, Russia's new political order was not even ten years old. By then the inhabitants of Ohrloff had repeatedly experienced the fury of a revolution compounded by civil war. There was also the fury of radical revolutionaries who were deeply convinced that there could be no exceptions to their concepts of public order. Administratively Ohrloff belonged to the Halbstadt volost (district), one of two volosts comprising of Molotschna settlement. The colony had been founded in 1804-05 by some 350 Mennonite families emigrating from West Prussia. At the dawn of the twentieth century the Halbstadt volost boasted highly productive farms, a modern flour-milling industry, several factories manufacturing farm machinery and bricks as well as some firms producing processed food, furniture and cloth. In the late nineteenth century the Molotschna Mennonites responded to tsarist pressures for russification and noncombatant state service by creating a broad range of institutions such as schools, hospitals, old age homes, an orphanage and a school for the deaf. The founding and development of such institutions was closely related to a widespread religious renewal which not only stressed personal piety but societal responsibility as well. A century of residence in Russia had not drastically altered the Mennonite sense of identity, an identity deeply rooted in language, religion and social structure. As late as 1917, in spite of some pressures resulting from the Russo-German war, there was no real indication that the traditional Russian Mennonite world would soon end.

Ohrloff experienced two revolutions in 1917. The February Revolution, while forcing the tsar to abdicate, went almost unnoticed at the village level. This was certainly not the case with the October Revolution which brought the Bolsheviks to power. When Red Army troops entered the Halbstadt volost during February, 1918, the region was subjected to an intense requisitioning of cattle, agricultural machinery and household inventory. Roving soldiers collected money and valuables at gunpoint. In Halbstadt itself six Mennonites were arrested and executed by a capricious volost commissar. It was natural that Ohrloff villagers only understood the new order in terms of heavily armed soldiers seizing livestock,

household and farming inventory, food and personal valuables. Little wonder that they warmly welcomed the German occupation troops which moved into the Ukraine under the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in April, 1918. The tranquillity was short-lived.

By late summer the collapse of Germany brought with it the withdrawal of German troops from the Ukraine. Fearing the depredations of bandits and marauding soldiers, the Molotschna Mennonites, encouraged and trained by the Germans, formed a *Selbstschutz*, a self-protection militia designed to protect Halbstadt and its sister volost Gnadenfeld. Initially its chief adversary was the independent partisan army headed by the anarchist Nestor Makhno. Two events turned a defensive militia into an aggressive one. Members of Denikin's White Army induced some *Selbstschutz* units to engage in military excursions against Russian villages occupied by Makhno. Then in March, 1919, it inadvertently engaged the Red Army approaching Halbstadt, not knowing that Makhno had allied himself with the Red Army. It would now be difficult for the Mennonites to convince their Bolshevik overlords of their historic pacifism. Meanwhile unrepentant members of the disbanded *Selbstschutz* engaged in a rash act which brought bloody retribution. A number of Makhno bandits had carried on a regional reign of terror using Ohrloff as their headquarters. Seeking to curb these excesses *Selbstschutz* partisans attacked a small Makhno contingent in the nearby village of Blumenort. The commander escaped but four of his men were killed. The anarchists took revenge. Some twenty Blumenort men were buried in a mass grave on November 14, 1919. Ohrloff and the neighboring villages of Altonau and Tiege also suffered some atrocities. In the Halbstadt volost the timely appearance of a Cossack regiment prevented further bloodshed.

For Ohrloff and the Halbstadt volost the arrival of the Red Army in December, 1919, was almost a welcome respite. Any kind of order was better than the see-saw of the civil war front moving north and south or the marauding bandits which usually operated between fronts. The Red Army occupation lasted until June, 1920. Though the physical violence had passed the problems which remained were also debilitating. In Ohrloff the requisitioning of horses and wagons continued. The quartering of troops reduced the food supply and also brought disease epidemics like typhus and smallpox. Then late in the spring of 1920 General Wrangel began the last White Army offensive of the civil war -- Ohrloff and the Halbstadt volost lay directly in the path of the advancing White troops. Again the front moved back and forth. Ohrloff might have Red Army "guests" in the morning and be forced to host White Army troops by evening. Though the Bolsheviks gradually gained

control by mid-October, civil instability persisted. Disease continued to ravage the weakened population and soon claimed more victims than civil war and anarchy.

A new threat now emerged -- famine. Food reserves, already depleted by the resident soldiers and the hordes of beggars, were further reduced when Mennonites from the Terek settlement in the Causasus, forcibly uprooted by nomadic tribes in the region, sought refuge in the volost. The food crisis escalated rapidly following a dry winter in 1920-21. Though timely rains brought good germination, the subsequent heat and drought produced almost total crop failure. By March and April of 1922 there was the threat of widespread starvation. Only the timely arrival of foodstuffs sent by American Mennonite Relief prevented a mass catastrophe.

Statistics¹ compiled after the worst of the crisis had passed illustrate the economic pressure to which Ohrloff had been subjected. Prior to World War I Ohrloff's total seeded area devoted to grain amounted to 855 dessiatines, by 1922 it stood at 545 dessiatines. Of these 512 d. were devoted to wheat in the pre-war period, by 1922 these were reduced to 110 d. The pre-war wheat yield of 85 pud per dessiatine was reduced to 21 pud by 1921. Similarly the village retained only 44 (1922) of its 285 (pre-W.W.I.) horses, 10 (1922) of its normal 215 (pre-W.W.I.) pigs, and 335 (1922) of its 1200 (pre-W.W.I.) chickens. Of the 106 families comprising Ohrloff in 1922, 76 possessed no horses and 20 no cows. Little wonder that Susan's memories of the shortages of 1921-22 still surface in her letters when the ugly specter of another famine raised its head in 1930.

Until 1922 the rapid sequence of events allowed the volost no time for any calculated response to changing circumstances. The average inhabitants of Ohrloff stood inside looking out. They had no sense of the magnitude of the confrontation between the new order and their traditional values and life style. They were unable to see how their minority practices -- religious nonconformity, the use of their Germanic languages, nonassimilation, nonresistance and the practice of capitalism -- were all at variance with the revolutionary order. Then too their all-embracing social structure based on the church and a broad array of welfare, medical and educational institutions ensured a sense of ongoing peoplehood by actively involving most of the community in one capacity or another. In the

¹The most illuminating documents involving Ohrloff and other villages in the Halbstadt volost were brought back by the American Mennonite Relief worker C.E. Krehbiel and deposited in the Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas.

post-revolutionary years this institutional base undergirding Mennonite identity was rapidly eroded. The state took over the schools and the training of youth. Mennonite teachers, who were also frequently local ministers, were dismissed from their posts. Revolutionary pedagogical theory and ideology soon dominated the schools. When observing the students in the village Susan laments their lack of discipline and lack of knowledge. The state also took over the welfare and medical institutions. For the moment only the church remained somewhat immune. Shortly after Susan began to write her letters even that changed.

Unknown to Susan the subsequent catastrophes which engulfed Ohrloff were rooted in Joseph Stalin's struggle for power following Lenin's death in January, 1924. The nationalization of agriculture was a key Bolshevik ideal from the very onset. When the so-called policy of War Communism (1918-21) with its forcible requisitioning brought disaster and famine in 1921-22, the party inaugurated a strategic retreat called the New Economic Policy, which once more allowed small scale private enterprise to flourish. Peasants were allowed to continue farming their own land. Stalin at first supported this policy but growing food shortages in 1927-28 apparently changed his mind. The food crisis was related to the fact that the poor peasant only produced enough for his own needs while those who were better off refused to sell their grain at the low prices fixed by the government. In order to deal with the situation the party's Central Committee ordered the direct seizure of grain in 1928. In what may well have been a case of misguided panic the peasants were now forced to contribute both their grain and cash reserves. By the fall, as Susan's letters so vividly portray, the grain was moved directly from the harvest fields to the shipping depots.

Now the party implemented a policy guaranteed to secure control of the grain supply -- collectivization. Naturally such a rapid transformation of the agricultural economy meant the use of force. A sense of urgency and crisis was generated by announcing the discovery of a class within -- the *kulak* (the tight-fisted one). The poor peasant was now promised the goods of his more prosperous neighbor with the object of generating a class-war within the village. The *kulak* would be dispossessed and expelled.

Within the party dekulakization was already the subject of debate early in 1929. By May the *kulak* had been legally defined and by late June a decree not only detailed the fine to be levied against the *kulak*, but the procedures for dispossession and confiscation as well. Another weapon in the fight against the new enemy involved the loss of electoral rights. Disenfranchisement, usually imprinted on personal documents, was especially devastating

if it was combined with expulsion from the village. It virtually ensured the denial of food, shelter and work in other regions.

Local resistance to dekulakization brought drastic reaction from Stalin and his cohorts. In December, 1929, he ordered thousands of party extremists as well as police and army units into the countryside. Reluctant villagers were pressured by the GPU and party members to denounce and eliminate the *kulak* in their midst. The definition of the *kulak* was now expanded beyond the prosperous farmer to include the religious leaders of the community, since it was correctly assumed that these opposed the regime ideologically. Peasant resistance often involved the destruction of inventory, the slaughtering of cattle and the burning of crops. This, combined with the widespread seizure of grain by the state, produced the second great famine of the Soviet era which, some estimate, killed between five and ten million people. Stalin sensed that Russia had reached a breaking point and on March 2, 1930, responded with a *Pravda* article entitled "Dizziness with Success." He blamed all the excesses on overzealous officials. The policy of collectivization, however, remained fully operative. Almost 90 percent of all farms were collectivized by 1936.

The method of identifying and processing the *kulak* was fairly uniform. Potential *kulaks* were registered and the list possibly revised at a public meeting. All franchised villagers were forced to attend and condemn the selected victims by majority vote. Confiscation and public auction of seized household inventory followed. Then came northern exile. Sometimes the *kulak* was fortunate enough to be resettled in a newly founded village. In the Ukraine the first Mennonite exiles began in late February and early March, 1930. Initially entire families were sent to forestry camps where they often had to erect their own shelters, work long hours and seek to survive on very scant rations. In some instances women and children were allowed to return after several months, but were not allowed to resettle in their home village.

As is clearly evident from Susan's letters, collectivization remained in full force throughout 1931-32, though the tactics seemed less drastic. Now excessive grain deliveries or monetary assessments designed to drive the victim into bankruptcy were levied. Failure to meet these demands brought confiscation, the loss of electoral rights and banishment. It became a extremely efficient method of ridding the Mennonite villages of ministers. Susan's references to the experiences of her brother Peter clearly illustrate the process. The first Five Year Plan, and with it the collectivization of agriculture, was declared complete in 1932. The pressure against the peasantry began to decline and the number of exiles dropped significantly. Millions of deaths during the

"terror-famine" had broken the will to resist.

Susan's experiences in Ohrloff were not only related to Stalin's determination to control the grain supply and destroy private farming. Moscow was also concerned with the Ukraine and its long tradition of independence. Three successive Red Army invasions were needed to secure Bolshevik control of the Ukraine between 1918-20. For the next decade party policy nevertheless remained rather tolerant in matters related to language and culture. Once Stalin consolidated his power in 1928, however, he and a segment of the party were prepared to crush all remnants of Ukrainian nationalism. From this standpoint the use of force was probably more pronounced in the Ukraine than elsewhere in Russia.

The Ukraine was also hard hit in what might be considered as the final phase of Stalin's consolidation of power -- the period of the "Great Terror." An inner purge of the Communist Party began late in 1934 following the mysterious assassination of Kirov, Stalin's assistant in Leningrad. By 1937 a "show trial" of seventeen party members, accused of working for Germany and Japan, paved the way for mass arrests in the party, the army and the general population. In many villages mass arrests and disappearance into oblivion became common occurrences. Mennonite villages lost between five and fifteen percent of their male population. The number of people arrested in a given village often depended on the fanaticism of local officials as well as the resistance or co-operation of the indigenous population.

The great purge of 1936-38 was especially directed against the intelligentsia. Mennonite ministers who had survived their earlier exiles, were now re-arrested. Some of these had fled to other Mennonite settlements in the Caucasus, Siberia and the Kuban, where they were completely dependent on the generosity of their co-religionists. Age or illness provided no protection against arrest. The majority of the exiles never returned. This destruction of ecclesiastical leadership and the confiscation of churches effectively ended the religious life of the Mennonite communities by the mid-thirties. The process involved another scenario: the widespread arrest of Mennonite teachers. Then too, the prohibition of all Christian weddings, funerals, festivals and even home services made it almost impossible to uphold traditional values and religious faith. The absence of virtually all expressions of Mennonite piety ensured a steady decline and Susan's letters clearly reflect this loss of religious continuity.

Susan's encounter with the purges of 1936-38 was fortunately minimal. By then she had left the turbulent life in Ohrloff for a difficult but secure existence in Melitopol. Her brothers Peter and Kornelius were not so fortunate. Both were arrested and both died

in concentration camps, Kornelius in 1939, Peter in 1943.

Unknown to her, Susan's days were also numbered. When German armored columns entered Russia during the summer of 1941 all citizens of German origin were hastily deported eastward. Susan too became a victim of this mass evacuation. Her last card was written on Easter Sunday of 1941. She spoke of a "ray of hope." It did not materialize. She was sent to Kazakstan with hundreds of others. Survival depended upon an earthen hut dug into the ground. Both Susan and her sister Liese died. Only Agnes survived and finally informed Gerhard of all that had transpired in 1947.

Family

Background information on the Jakob W. Toews family is almost nonexistent. A family memoir compiled by father Jakob a few years before his death in 1933 remained with his daughter Agnes in Russia until her death in 1963. No copy of it was ever sent to any of his three sons in Canada. Gerhard, the youngest son, compiled his own memoirs in the late 1960s under the title *Notizen und Erinnerungen* (Notes and Reminiscences). They provide considerable information about family experiences during the revolution and civil war, but offer little enlightenment on either early or later family history. Gerhard fortunately compiled a family register (Appendix A) which provides the vital statistics for each family member. It also helps to clarify the often guarded references to various family members in the correspondence.

The surviving letters were addressed to the youngest son Gerhard (1903-1984). Jakob W. Toews married three times. His first wife Helena Cornies, died after twelve years of marriage, while his second wife, Margaretha Braun, died after only five years. All of the children of his third marriage to Elisabeth Klassen, seven in all, remained in the Ohrloff vicinity. The family wanted to emigrate to Canada but, with the exception of Gerhard and two brothers, were unable to obtain exit visas. Jakob, a son from the first marriage, and Wilhelm, a son from the second, left in 1924 and 1925 respectively. The four unmarried sisters continued to live with their father and cared for him until his death in 1933. Almost all the Ohrloff family members, including father Jakob, continued to write to Gerhard in Canada. Their letters tended to be brief and factual, except of course those written by Susan. A special relationship seems to have existed between Gerhard and his elder

sister. At times Susan projects a maternal concern for her "little brother" who was the last of three brothers to leave Russia. The bonds between Susan and Gerhard were also nurtured by the fact that both were avid correspondents.

Susan is a born letter writer. She is never at a loss for words. Few events in Ohrloff escape her notice and they are usually chronicled in a detailed and intimate fashion. Susan is very opinionated. Her harsh judgments are usually directed against the perpetrators of evil and wrong in the world of village politics, or the grandiose stupidities of would-be "world reformers." On the other hand she has only tenderness and compassion for the tragedies engulfing acquaintances and loved ones. Susan is an open and uncomplicated person. There is nothing artificial or contrived in the letters. She finds herself in the midst of constellations and happenings which she can not hope to understand or explain. She belongs to the insignificant and powerless in the new order of things. Her letters are nevertheless permeated with the sense of the heroic. She describes the prevailing ineptitude and corruption and becomes a voice in the wilderness demanding a return to public decency and morality. Yet in a world given to increasing madness she has an amazing capacity to detect the obviously humorous and to laugh at the obviously absurd.

Susan's letters provide a woman's view of an early stage of Russian communism as it came to be applied at the village level. Never before had political, economic and social upheavals affected the life of the Russian or for that matter the Mennonite village so profoundly. Susan becomes something of a keen yet detached observer who chronicles the disintegration of a peoplehood and a way of life she has known since childhood. There is anger, frustration, sarcasm and occasionally despair. In the end, when the family finally decides to leave Ohrloff, there is also fear. In a sense the letters become a private interpretation of the Mennonite experience in the Ukraine during the 1930s. As such they contain elements of the everyday and the cosmic, the trivial and the profound, the personal and the societal.

It is ironic that the rambling accounts of a lowly village seamstress make a mockery of grandiose revolutionary schemes. She parades recognizable men and women before us whose daily actions fly into the face of an ideology which seeks to compress humanity into a pre-ordained pattern of behavior. In the village of Ohrloff there are no peasants heroically striving for the establishment of a new order. Instead there are only warm blooded people, some wise and others muddle-headed, whose individual decisions bring havoc to the prescribed course of the revolution at the local level. There are also those who have been drained of their energy

and vitality by the relentless pressure of totalitarianism. They have become compliant, almost devoid of individuality and thereby rob the revolution of its will to succeed. Susan's characters act out of personal not collective motives. They are simply people and they cannot be reduced to systems and models or statistics. In the face of so much of what we do as sociologists, demographers, anthropologists and historians, Susan, in her naive and unaffected way, reminds us that life as we know it consists mainly of people, that there are all kinds of them, and that they are usually not predictable.

The Letter Collection

The Gerhard J. Toews letter collection was donated to the Mennonite Library and Archives some time before 1970. The donor subsequently requested the return of the material to Ruthven, Ontario, as he wished to reread the letters and better organize the collection. I had examined the collection while on sabbatical leave at the Mennonite Library and Archives and subsequently requested permission to transcribe the letters. The material was sent to Saskatoon by Gerhard Toews where it was painstakingly transcribed. It was not an easy task for the Toews family members deployed a variety of scripts and an even greater variety of writing materials. Blessings on Katherine Hooze for her dedication to this task! The letters were subsequently returned to Ontario, but never found their way to North Newton, Kansas. Haunted by memories of what had happened to his family in Russia and afflicted by the weakness of old age, Gerhard Toews decided to destroy the collection lest it fall into communist hands. Except for a few xerox copies of sample letters only the transcription survives. The letters for the year 1933 never reached Saskatoon, nor can it be determined how many other letters in the collection were lost. Susan often makes reference to letters which apparently reached Canada but cannot be found in the collection.

In 1977 I approached Gerhard J. Toews for permission to translate and eventually publish some of the letters. It was granted. Unfortunately I could only begin the task in 1987. Gerhard, together with his brothers Ernest and Werner, graciously reaffirmed their father's wish in 1987. I want to thank them for their support and encouragement of this project. Only Susan's letters were translated. Interested researchers may wish to pursue the other letters in the transcription at the Mennonite Library and Archives.

Throughout 1927 there was only one concern in Susan's household -- emigration. Brother Gerhard has left late in 1926 and the other members of the household hope to follow. Though the normal community events -- births, illnesses, weddings and funerals -- are dutifully chronicled there is a sense of detachment from the everyday. The family attends to the basic necessities of survival but its aspirations for the future lie in a new land. As the months pass the prospect of emigration wanes and the letters gravitate between hope and despair. Melitopol officials keep postponing the issue of exit visas. Brother Peter travels to the city time and again only to be disappointed. It is difficult for Susan to conceal her growing impatience and frustration.

Meanwhile the short letters of 80 year old Jakob tersely report the highlights of village life. New villages are being constructed in the vicinity and some of the building materials come from the barns and granaries which are being demolished in the local village. Some 12 or 13 local farmers have banded together to form a commune, an experiment which proved rather successful, at least judging by the amount of grain which they harvested. Jakob mentions that the anniversary of the October Revolution was duly celebrated in Mennonite villages, but generally is far more concerned with the activities in the local church. An air of normalcy prevails. Traditional celebrations mark the passing of New Year, Easter, Pentecost, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Judging by the number of ministers presiding at these festivities, government pressure has not yet thinned their ranks. Bible courses, youth conferences and choirs are still within the normal sphere of ecclesiastical activities.

As the year draws to a close it becomes clear that the family will not be leaving in the near future. They stock up on potatoes and grain for the winter months ahead. Food prices are reasonable and there is no concern about possible food shortages. A note of optimism prevails. Jacob predicts a widespread clamor for exit visas in 1928 and assures his son Gerhard that the family too will renew its application.

1

Sunday, January 16, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this letter I can report that we are well, thank God. We wish you the same. Yesterday it was four weeks since you left. You are probably there already.

The holidays are passed. We celebrated them in the customary way. The family spent boxing day with us. The rest of the holidays there were no visitors except for neighbors who dropped in now and then. The day before yesterday was my birthday and although we had not invited anyone we had a number of guests. During the day there were the Peter Toews, Maria Warkentin and Mrs. W. Wark. In the evening there were the Frank Martens, the neighbor lady and Maria Neufeld. You can imagine that things were rather lively. . . .

There is a lot of activity in the local farmer's club. One evening the male chorus sings, the next a strong man struts his stuff, on the third the teacher Johann Janzen talks about the wonders of the stars or how people want to travel to the moon. There is no shortage of listeners. Apparently a movie projector has also arrived. . . .

I sincerely wish that things will go well for you over there.

2*Sunday, January 27, 1927*

Dear Brother:

. . . We received your last letter from London and see that you passed your medical examination. We hope you overcame the sea sickness. We still do not have our exit visas and according to all reports will not get them before February 17. This means more and more waiting. Our patience is being sorely tested. Six months and still we have nothing! . . . We hope it will not be too long until we see each other again. Life here has little variation. The sisters knit all day and also in the evening. . . .

With warmest greetings from,

Your sister Susan

February 13, 1927

Dear brother:

With this [letter] I want to report that we are all well, thank God, and we wish the same for you. We are still sitting here and waiting for our visas. Hopefully they will soon arrive. They have promised them after February 17. One day after another passes and already six months have passed. . . .

Since you left we have already bought flour twice. We haven't opened the second sack yet since the first should last another week. We bought the extra flour as a precaution. There were so many rumors floating about. How we wish we were over there. . . .

The soviet is demanding another payment. Every male under age 45 who has been disenfranchised is to pay 10 rubles. This will cause a lot of fuss. . . .

Two chicken barns were recently visited during the night and 85 chickens taken. Twelve suffocated in route and had been thrown from the wagon by the bridge, where skaters found them the next morning. They also visited the butchers where several sheep had been slaughtered a few days earlier.

From this you can see that we work diligently here, not only during the day, but during the night. . . .

Last week half of the village got a notification from *Ruskapa*¹ that those who wish to leave this year should send word whether they wished to travel on half or full credit. Brother P. wrote back immediately and said full credit. . . .

They elected some ministers here: first, Peter Loewen from Tiege; secondly, Peter Wiens of Tiege, formerly Pastwa; thirdly, Jacob Baergmann from Muensterberg. . . .

Greetings to all,

Your sister Susan

¹Russian-Canadian-American Passenger Agency, which supervised the technical aspects of emigration in Moscow.

Sunday, February 20, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

It is Sunday afternoon and this is the fourth letter I'm writing to you [this year]. We still don't have our visas and are waiting for them each day. Brother Peter is very nervous that his are not coming. . . We got your letter this week informing us that you had arrived at brother W. We are so happy that you managed to get through. . . . If only we will be as lucky as you. We want to hope for the best. . . What will you do over there? As long as I can work [when I get there] I'll do anything as long as its not knitting. . . Yesterday it was 9 weeks since you left -- such a long time and yet it sometimes seems that it was only yesterday.

Friday was election day. Johann Mirau remains as village mayor. In the district [soviet] Jakob Warkentin and Heinrich Sudermann of Tiege were elected. . . .

Nickel went to Lichtenau this afternoon to give [baptismal] instruction. He goes every Sunday afternoon. Every Friday afternoon he gives instruction in the Ohrloff Church.

Greetings from all of us,

Your sister Susan

March 6, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

This week we received your letter of February 9. You thought we might be on our way. No such luck. We're sitting here as if we were nailed down. First it was: wait until the census, then wait until February 17, and now March 15 when the elections end. Who knows what it will be then? We simply have to wait. . . .

The sisters are knitting for Riedigers, Hieberts and Nickels. It will probably not end until we leave. . . If they give the visas after March 15 we could be there by May 1. You and we will both have to be patient. There is nothing we can do.

The women's auxillary in the church is raffling off a home made comforter. They have sold 200 tickets at 50 kopecks each. What nerve! And then they went from house to house and even to other

villages trying to sell them. They were so insistent that it seemed compulsory. Half as many tickets had been plenty. Well it is for a good cause but they need not have been so aggressive. . . .

The minister David Epp, Lichtenau, is moving to the Old Colony in the near future. The elder there died suddenly and so he will take his place for several years. It is too bad for he will be missed here.

Things are very active in the club house. One presentation after another. During these last four days there were two: one by the Ohrloff High School students, the other by the ones from Halbstadt. The Ohrloff students collected 104 rubles. Then there are reading evenings. Now they are waiting for films. The people come in droves and leave most of their money behind. . . .

Will close for today. Warmest greetings from us all. I wish you well with all my heart,

Your sister Susan

6

Sunday, March 20, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

I better try to write again since 14 days have passed since I last wrote. I did not want to write before we got our exit visas, but nothing can be done. We simply have to wait patiently. Sometimes it becomes unbearable. Its over six months now and still we have to wait. David Hiebert and Peter Baerg want to travel to Melitopol tomorrow and pay for the visas. Brother Peter wants to go with them and see if the visas have arrived. They have promised to issue them. Well we will see if its true. If they have not arrived by the end of the month we will be moving to the Unruhs. . . .

Let me report the latest news. Last week an entire robber band was arrested here and, with hands tied behind their backs, they were taken to Halbstadt. It probably won't help too much. As soon as they are free the thieving starts all over again. Franz Unruh in Tiege suddenly had a lot of money and was even willing to loan some of it. This made people suspicious. When they asked him where he got it he lied and said it was from his brother K. Unruh. People checked and found it was not true. Another time he said he had borrowed it from the bank and the third time he said he found it on the street. He soon backed himself into a corner. It turned out that the theft of wagons, harnesses, bulls, chickens and

tools was all their doing. . . some 14 men in all. . .

You'll have to forgive us if we don't write every week. There is nothing new to report. The sisters sew and knit and I and father don't know what to do for impatience. We have nothing to do with the farm and we're tired of reading. We won't be planting any vegetables, at least not for the next 14 days. We want to hear what the news is from Melitopol.

. . . Enough. If we get the visas this week we will write immediately. May the waiting soon come to an end.

Your sister Susan

March 23/1927

P.S. About the visas -- they now tell us sometime in April. . . In Melitopol many were making payments -- 200 rubles. Yet the more it costs the more want to go.

7

Sunday, April 3, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this letter I want to report that we moved on Thursday and are quite comfortable in our new home. . . We don't know when we will be coming. They have told us mid-April, but its difficult to know how long. They want to tease us. Brother Peter wants to travel to the city and make inquiries next week. . .

There is still constant thievery. If things continue this way there will soon be no chickens. Some farms don't have a single hen. . .

In three weeks its Easter and I'm afraid we have to celebrate it here. We would so like to leave. . .

Your sisters are supposed to write, but they think I can do it so much better. If only we could soon leave!

Your sister Susan

Sunday, April 17, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

I want to write a few words. It's 14 days since I sent the last letter. We got your letter no. 11 yesterday. To date they have all arrived.

Brother Peter travelled to the city this week, but returned without accomplishing anything. They tried to sooth him with the same words they used on you. He asked them directly whether they would grant the visas or not. Certainly they replied. One person is promised an immediate visa, another is told this month etc. Those who have paid are all supposed to leave by June. What is one to believe?

There is little new here. There are thefts from time to time. They even take bee hives. . . .

Wishing you a happy Easter.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

Tuesday, April 27, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

. . . Today is the last day of the Easter celebration and a beautiful day. It has rained almost every day during the holidays so that the people could not finish their field work. . . . On the first day of Easter the minister Epp held his farewell sermon here in the Church. They want to move to the Old Colony right after the holidays and stay there for several years. Yesterday the newly elected minister Peter Wiens from Tiege preached. Today Jacob Baergen from Muensterberg is to preach. . . .

Father and the sisters went to church. These are such lovely days, but who knows what will come. If only we could leave. The people are asking what we want over there, for there are many negative letters arriving. . . .

Wishing you the best of health and hoping for a reunion soon.

I remain in love,

Sister Susan

Sunday, May 15, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

It is Sunday morning and time for me to write again. . . When you get this letter we hope to be on our way. Mind you we have often hoped. Maybe it will happen this time. The people are literally storming [the visa offices in] Melitopol and the [officials] must finally get tired of it. . . .

Dr. Tavonius in Muntau was buried on May 3. Some 10,000 people attended. He died at the age of 55. He got soaked going to Melitopol, where he wanted to get his exit visa in order to visit his wife abroad. He hoped to bring her home since her medical condition had improved. He contracted pneumonia and died. It is a great loss for the next of kin and for the hospital. Before he died he appointed Dr. Franz Dick as his successor. . . .

Well we celebrated the first of May here. Four tractors with wagons hitched behind them drove down the street followed by a large crowd on foot. Speeches were held at the end of the village, then everyone returned home. . . .

Today the Lichtenau [Church] is celebrating its Spring Festival. It was celebrated here in the Ohrloff Church last Sunday. Welk from Altenau spoke as well as the fat Welk from Fischau. My he can preach! No one in these two churches is his equal.

There is still thieving from time to time. Last week they broke in at four places. Fortunately the night watch heard it and sounded the alarm. The thieves fired and the bullet just missed Johann Hack's head. There was a big fuss on the street. They suspect that gypsies were involved. . . .

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

May 29, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

Fourteen days have passed since my last letter and so I want to write again. I don't much care to write since I can't report that we are coming. I didn't want to write until I could tell you that, but

it could take a long time. I don't think it will be this year. Things could suddenly move quickly, but as things stand now it doesn't appear that way. . . . Brother P. travelled to the city last week. They told him to come on that and that date, then the visas would be ready. When they arrived they were again told to wait. . . .

Johann Janzen wants to go on Tuesday, but who knows whether it will help. May God grant it. One literally becomes ill from all the waiting, its almost 10 months now. . . . If we don't get our visas soon we want to buy a cow.

Here each Sunday is a May festival. Once its the Sunday School, then the village school students, then the young people, then the choir members. . . .

Yesterday in the forenoon was the final school exam and in the evening there was a big spectacle at the club. Today there is a movie to which the people bring their hard earned money.

The Tiege Co-operative is in bad shape. It owes 22,000 rubles and is apparently near bankruptcy. The members are now to pay 45 rubles each. You can imagine what kind of anger this generates, not only with the men but also with the women. We're fortunate not to be involved. . . .

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

12

June 13, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

Fourteen days have passed since I last wrote. . . . We still do not have our visas. We keep hoping from one day to the next. Brother Peter travelled to the city yesterday and was again told "In the near future." Well it may happen sometime. He went there with some documents and then had to fill out some more papers. . . .

We have one less worry this year and that is you. Why you ask. I'll tell you. Your age group and the ones in the following year were drafted on Monday and immediately sent away into the big wide world. No one knows where or why? They were notified on Saturday and Monday they had to go to the city. When brother Peter went there yesterday, they were being sent out at 9 A.M. They were told it was for a period of three months and that they

should provide their own clothing. We thank God you're over there. There were four men from our village: H.W., J.H., W.W., J.J. Only those who had received a court order had to go. Most of them were married men. The poor fellows are really to be pitied. . . .

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

13

Sunday, July 3, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

. . . We are still sitting and waiting. No one knows when we will finally be able to depart. Several families were able to leave from Einlage [to make room for the workers on] the Dnieper Power Station. They got their visas in three weeks and we? It is sometimes almost unbearable. Again and again it's patience, patience. Enough of this or I'll become too agitated.

We are in the middle of cutting grain. The binders and the tractors leave in the morning and return at night. The wheat and the rye has more or less been cut. . . .

Our cow produced 225 kilo milk during the month of June. . . We made four heads of cheese. . . .

Wishing you the best of health,

Your sister Susan

14

Sunday, July 31, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

. . . We are always busy, running about from morning until late. We're more or less finished with the cherries and are now processing the apricots and pears. . . We have also cooked fresh Borscht using fresh tomatoes. . . .

Don't worry about us too much. What can't be changed can't be changed. We simply have to face the inevitable. Our time will

come. We want to trust Him who leads the hearts of men like a stream of water. Good-bye. . . .

Your sister Susan

15

Sunday, September 11, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

. . . It is Sunday afternoon and time to give free reign to ones thoughts. I could write many things on paper, but I want to wait until I can do it verbally. If that happens your going to tell us to quiet down and not talk all at once. If only we were at that stage. . . .

We're still sitting and waiting, hoping from one day to the next. Brother Peter and many others have been rejected, but they are not giving up hope. Next year they want to begin again. . . .

Greet everyone from us. Hoping for a reunion soon.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

16

Sunday, September 25, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

. . . Though we don't have much to complain about, our life is nevertheless monotonous. We have waited for the visas for over a year and yet we're supposed to have patience. . . .

There is constant traffic on the street. Many automobiles are driving passengers from Melitopol to Tokmak. It is faster than the railway. Many people from the villages are also going to the circus in the city, which has already been there for a month and a half. . . . Let them go, its not important to me. If only we could leave. . . .

Sunday School has stopped completely. The children could no longer be kept in order. One man and ten ladies could not keep 50-60 children in order. Isn't that incredible? Yet its true: one

pinches, the other slaps, the third is cracking sunflower seeds, the fourth is talking, the fifth is turning around, the sixth is sliding back and forth, so that a teacher has to constantly hold him. . . The upcoming youth has no respect.

I will close. We don't know whether we'll be coming soon or not. We must be prepared for all eventualities. . . .

Wishing you all the best I remain,

Your sister Susan

17

Sunday, October 9, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

. . . Yesterday evening there was a program in the High School. The students presented various items, a male choir and a mixed choir sang, and stringed instruments were played. The main thing was a buffet and everyone who could walk went to it. We didn't. . . .

This week many wares arrived in the co-operative. The people came early. They had to take a number and wait their turn. Only members were allowed. The others were only allowed to buy kerosene and matches. . . We also can't sell milk, that is only reserved for members. Well we have good use for the milk and butter ourselves. These little kings need not think we're going to come and run after them. . . .

If only they would make us happy and allow us to leave! If only we could send you word that we are on our way! We keep hoping from one day to the next. You ask when we might be leaving. Unfortunately we don't know that. Many have been taken off the list and only very few remain. . . .

Liese and Mariechen are knitting for Loewens and Agnes is spinning. I can do neither so I have to do such work as I can find. Father writes or reads the newspapers. In the evening someone reads and thus we spend our time. It would certainly be nicer if we were all together and then did our reading. We wish this could happen in the coming winter.

Wishing you all the best and hoping for a happy reunion I remain,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, Oct. 23, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

. . . It is Sunday morning. Father and the two sisters have gone to church. Liese went to stay with the children so that the P. Toews' could go to church, and so I'm home all alone. . . .

It has frozen several times and the leaves are falling from the trees. . . We are still sitting here, waiting and wondering if we'll be able to leave this year. People are ridiculing us and saying it will be years before we'll be able to leave. When God's hour comes we will be able to go. He can help. . . .

Mutton and pork is currently 25 kopecks a pound and beef is 18 kopecks. Eggs cost 32 kopecks and butter is 1⁹⁰ a kilo. . . .

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, November 20, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

Today is Sunday and its raining outside and so I want to try to fill this page. . . .

Last week both Riedigers and Unruhs slaughtered pigs. Father and the sisters went to help the Riedigers. I stayed home alone but was not alone. The little girls came for a visit. They think they have to come everyday whether its good weather or bad. They are already singing Christmas songs and have so many wishes and questions that I'm sometimes glad when they leave. Yes its five weeks until Christmas and we are still sitting here waiting day after day for news. Will it really happen this year?

The people are travelling to the city in order to shop. There they can find what they like and get as much as they want. Here in the co-operative there is chaos and a great deal of fighting and wrangling. They can only get so many meters [of cloth] per member, and then only if they buy certain other items. . . .

Its time for us to eat our chicken soup then I'll continue the letter.

Well the clock just struck 11 A.M. and we've finished our

soup. . . Father is sleeping and the sisters are reading, even though they have read the stuff ten times. . . . Twice a week we get *Das Neue Dorf*. We read the most important material the first evening and then father reads the rest of it the next day. Your letter usually arrives on Monday and is reread until the next one comes. We can't count the number of times we've looked at the pictures. . . . We've got 30 pictures from you. . . .

I remain,

Your sister Susan

20

Sunday, December 4, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

Today is Sunday and I want to write to you again, but I do so with a heavy heart. You are there, we are here. We received our [visa] rejection on November 24. Nothing can be done. We simply have to wait, but we have not give up hope. Our experience is like that of the children of Israel whom Pharaoh would not let go because the Lord had hardened his heart. Yet in the end they were allowed to leave. We really don't want to murmur or complain. He is the Lord and everything is in His hand. When His hour has come we will be able to go. . . Sometimes things seem fairly good, if one does not allow ones thoughts to wander too much. But if one sits and thinks one is overcome with such longing -- yet I don't want to burden your heart. We want to lift up our eyes to the hills from whence comes our help. So please don't burden yourself [on our account]. . . . I always thought the letter writing would soon end. . . .

We are not sure what we will do now. In the long run we can't stay in rented quarters. If something can be found we want to get back on our own. . . We're expecting our [visa] refund soon. . . they've already had the money for 16 months. My heart rebels again and again in this matter and does not want to calm down. . . .

What else shall I tell you. Father and Liese are taking a nap and the other two went to Bible study. The minister Epp is sorely missed. Nickel will not be able to do what he did. [The church] has already bought a wagon for [Nickel] and now want to buy him 100 pud of oats. That will not be cheap. Then he also gets 85

rubles per month. Schmidt gets 40 rubles a month and 75 rubles per year as [church] secretary. He gets an additional 100 rubles [per year?] for keeping the church clean. He lives next to the Lichtenau church . . . The Ohrloff Church has no common program with Lichtenau except for exchange preaching. . . .

Wishing you all the best I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

Tuesday, December 20, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

Fourteen days have passed since my last letter and so I will write again. . . .

Christmas Eve is again going to be celebrated in the church as is customary. After the children's program the choir is going to sing accompanied by Grete Nickel on the piano and Paul Friesen on the violin. The last holiday in the evening the choir will present an oratorio depicting the Christmas story. It will be outstanding and interesting. That Abram Loewen knows how to do things properly and the choir members are very loyal to him. . . .

Well what did you think of my letter? I imagine you were upset as we are. The storm has somewhat abated though not completely. We simply have to accept our fate though this is not easy. As long as we all remain well our time will come. Those who have received their visas want to leave after the holidays. You have been gone a whole year and this is the second Christmas we're celebrating without you. . . .

We washed and baked last week. We have made several presents for the children. Then too people want various things knit for Christmas but we sent them elsewhere. We're just too busy the last days before Christmas. . . .

Wishing you all the best I remain,

Your sister Susan

December 27, 1927

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this letter I want to report that we are all well, thank God, and we wish you the same with all our hearts. Today is the last day of the Christmas celebration. Father and the two sisters went to church. . . Yesterday the family was here: the Peter Toews, the Jakob Hieberts, Peter Hiebert and sister Grete and her children . . . Christmas Eve was celebrated in the church and many people were present. . . .

If the emigration were to begin again then for everyone who was refused there will be ten others who want to leave, yet they are keeping us behind iron bars. Someday the bars will be broken. They will not always have their will. . . .

Wishing you all the best, I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

As in the previous year Susan still wants to "leave here at all costs." New applications for exit visas must be made. News spreads through the villages that relatives in North America can request the exodus of next of kin in Russia. The rumor proves to be false. Here and there a few fortunate acquaintances are granted exit visas and leave for Canada. Susan's family is not so fortunate: they spend the entire year waiting for visas. The thought that God is still in charge repeatedly calms Susan's intensifying impatience.

The increased economic and political pressure on the villagers takes several forms. The re-division of land continues in 1928 and a number of farmers are resettled into the new villages. The issue results in weekly and sometimes daily meetings in the village. There is a new more ominous development. In his first letter of the year father Jakob reports that the government is demanding 2000 pud of wheat from the village by February 1. Members of the local co-op are assessed large cash levies. Grain confiscations accompanied by intensive house searches and threats of arrest are becoming common place. Worst of all a dry and windy spring destroys the winter wheat and ensures that the yield of spring grains is far below average. Meanwhile authorities order that the grain be moved directly from the threshing machines to the shipping depots. Susan predicts that it will be a great year for barley bread since that is the only kind of flour available. Father Jakob reports that "we are saving our bread and eating lots of vegetables".

Religiously the community can still hold its regular worship services and celebrate its traditional festivals. An attempt to prohibit Christmas Eve celebrations in the local church is ignored though "there were no songs, verses or goodies". There are nevertheless some disturbing trends. Though Sunday School is being held in the homes the children are apparently disinterested and disrespectful. Susan is sure it reflects the lack of any serious learning or discipline in the public school. Furthermore the practice of Mennonite nonresistance is becoming increasingly difficult. Brother Peter, the minister at Ohrloff, reports that some 72 young men have renounced non-resistance and that the issue is causing much debate in the church. Those who wish to uphold the teaching and elect alternative service often find themselves doing convict labor. Susan's letters suggest that another more subtle force is undermining the traditional morality of the religious community. The new regime has inaugurated a competing institution -- the local clubhouse. Here a new ideology and culture is being promoted

through films, radio broadcasts, special lectures and public entertainment. Local high school students present literary evenings and there are special readings from the works of the Low German writer Fritz Reuter. In mid-summer there was another distraction: a pub opens in the village and enjoys good patronage from the very onset. News is supplied by the local newspaper, *Das Neue Dorf* which, thanks to the absence of other material, even father Jakob reads.

1

January 18, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

Three weeks have passed since I sent the last letter so I will write again. A large storm passed over us last week and we thought it better not to write for a while because the letter might not get there. The storm has more or less passed and the men are walking the streets with bowed heads and wonder where they are going to get the money, for their pockets are empty. They cannot take a horse or a cow to market and yet the money must be there. They are to pay 8 rubles for every cow they have in the cattle co-operative. Little wonder that people are so depressed. We're so happy we're not affected by this.

We received your letters of December 6 and 12 on January 3. Yesterday, January 17, we got your letter of December 23. . . We don't know how many letters have gone lost. I'm going to insist that when you write you will put the number next to the signature. . . .

We are still waiting for information [concerning emigration]. Brother P. then wants to go to the city and make a further payment. We hope to come this year. Many are already waiting. Esau who lives on the sheep farm received his exit visas 14 days ago and wants to leave in February.

The people are still coming to father for advice even though according to the newspapers they are supposed to be clever and enlightened

Thank you so much for the good wishes and the verses. Greetings to all. Wishing you all the best,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, January 29, 1928

Dear Gerhard:

Since its Sunday once again I want to chat with you. We've lived through another cloudy week. There is no sunshine outside and for some there is none inside either. The men wander about with sad faces and wonder if anything will change. They are to deliver their last grain and it is a long time before the new grain becomes available. Hunger is such a terrible thing. I would not want to live through it again. We got your last letter of Dec. 31 on January 23. It seems no. 3 was lost. . . .

It was the Lord's will that you were able to go earlier. The time will come where we too will be able to go. . . We sent a letter of inquiry to *Ruskapa* right after New Year and asked whether we should demand a refund of our money. They were encouraging and so this week we want to start with our application all over again. Its a lot of fuss. . . but I will gladly do it as long as it helps. How gladly I would place all of this into your hands. It is very hard for me because formerly I was never concerned with this kind of thing. Today in the Bible I read Isaiah 41:13 "For I the Lord hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I will help you'". Isn't that a beautiful word of comfort. . . They tell us that if we apply now we will know in a month and a half whether we get our exit visas or not. Then if we're not rejected and pay our money we get a visa in one week. The new rule says that we have to pay only 10% of the cost of each visa. If we are rejected the 10% is not refunded. If one is rejected this year one can't reapply until next year. Well enough of this otherwise your head will begin to spin. . . .

A warm greeting from,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, February 12, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

It is Sunday and 14 days since we wrote you the last letter. I'll see if I can fill the page. We are all well. Tomorrow it will be

three weeks since we received your last letter. It was written on December 31 and received on January 23. We know you have written but where are the letters? . . .

We here live in a very sad time. God knows where it will all end. When will the pressure which all feel so keenly stop? Recently our landlord expressed the wish that spring would soon come, in nature and in man. . . .

For the people here resettlement is the most important thing. Three farmers have already left and who knows how many others there will be. . . .

Now a few words about us. In the last letter I wrote that we wanted to apply for the visas again but we haven't done so. We've got other advice. If possible brother P. wants to travel there to check up on things. If this doesn't help we'll probably begin the process early in March. We can't rid ourselves of the idea: leave here at all costs. We have not given up hope that God, who led us apart, will bring us together again.

Our cow is to calve soon so we will have our own milk. Currently butter costs 1³⁵ a pound and eggs, 40 kopecks. At those prices very few will buy, especially with money so scarce. . . .

Greetings from all. Wishing you all the best.

Your Susan

4

Sunday, February 26, 1928

Dear Gerhard:

Since it's Sunday and 14 days since I sent the last letter I'll try to fill the page. We got your letter of January 29 on Thursday, February 23. Two letters have apparently been lost. . . The needle, picture and clipping were all inside. Thank you so much for the needle, we can't get those kind here. Do your letters arrive so sporadically?

Our cow had a calf on February 20. It was a large bull calf which we slaughtered yesterday. The cow gives a lot of milk. . . . Here in the village many bought cows at the market in summer and some were taken for a ride. . . .

The spring waters, which were very high, have receded because of the sharp frost. Now the propagandists can get back to the village and fill our ears with their shouting every evening. . . .

Here in the church the choir sang about winter's departure one

evening. It seems everyone who could walk went. They said the choir sang wonderfully. . . .

When I wrote you the last letter I told you about the new exit visa applications. We sent the papers off three weeks ago. If we're not asked to come for an interview we want to go directly when the roads are better. If that doesn't help we have to start all over again. We hope for the best. If it is God's will we will get there. We only have to have patience. It is a precious thing to be patient and wait for the help of the Lord. . . .

With warm greetings from us all and hoping for a reunion soon.

Your sister Susan

5

Sunday, March 11, 1928

Dear Gerhard:

Since its Sunday and 14 days have passed since I last wrote you I will again try to fill the page. We received your letter of February 6 on February 12 and the birthday letter of February 14 on March 6. Our letter has again been lost. What do they want [to know] from us? . . .

We still have not got to the city. We wanted to go yesterday but it rained throughout Friday evening and Friday night so nothing came of it. Even if it takes long our time will come. P. Baerg made a payment last week. His wife came and told us about it. This time they think they will be able to leave. . . .

The co-operative is to be organized in such a way that only members and no one else can buy products. Well we won't starve and freeze on that account.

Today there is a songfest in the Ohrloff Church. There will be many people there. I almost forgot to tell you that on father's birthday the choir sang two songs at our window. They came from the other end of Tiege and sang at several other places where there were sick people. . . There is a lot of illness here among young and old. . . .

Wishing you all the best and hoping for a happy reunion.

I remain,

Your sister Susan

March 25, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this letter I want to report that we are all well, thank God, which we also wish for you. We received your letter of March 1 on March 22 and see that you have received all our letters. . . .

Our coming does not look very promising. Brother P. went to the city to check on our applications. They told him they could do nothing and that we should take them to Kharkov. We found several others who had been rejected and wanted to do this, but we've postponed it for the present because a Higher Power has advised it. Hearts here are currently boiling and seething and a storm is approaching. We have to gather all our patience together and wait. It will finally happen even though everything is against it. We must become quiet even though it is painful. He will bring us together again -- we want to believe and cling to that. Even if it takes long the Lord will make it possible. God uses the longest yardstick to measure the suffering of his dearest children. . . .

Sunday School is currently being held in the homes here but the people are not happy with it. The children can't sit still and since it is held alternately in different houses, they sit and look and admire everything. When asked questions they give no or very poor answers. If I were a teacher I wouldn't put up with it. I'd spank them all. Its just that they are being brought up without any discipline.

. . . Nikolas Janz of Lindenau sold everything last week and with his and several other families moved to the Amur [river]. They think it will be easier to get to America from there. George Wedel recently travelled to Persia to see whether he can get abroad from there. If he can he wants to sell everything and with his mother and family journey that route. You can see how badly people want to leave here. Brother P. is also interested in this route if it is not too difficult.

I must close. We send you warm greetings and wish you a happy Easter.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

Ohrloff, March 27, 1928

Dear Gerhard:

Father wants me to write in order to make sending these letters worthwhile. . . .

Its been a busy week. Thursday evening was woman's day in the club house, and after that a concert. Mrs. Jungens spoke. At the close Miss Loewen from Tiege, who is the teacher for the Russian children, also spoke. Friday evening there was a reading from Fritz Reuter and on Saturday the Halbstadt agricultural students had a literary evening. Everyone goes to these things. They said it was completely packed. That is where the money goes. As if there weren't enough expenses already! Today there is a songfest. They [the singers] have their expenses and do not sing free of charge, yet the people come. One evening not too long ago they had choir practice in the church. When it was finished they went home and left the large lamp burning in the baby's room. In the morning Friesen went to check if the singers had locked the door. It was open a crack. When he looked in he reeled back in surprise. The entry hall and the room were all black. Luckily neither the lamp or the cylinder cracked, but it was thick with soot. If the cylinder had cracked the church would have burned down because everything around it was wood. . . .

Enough! I never thought I'd fill the page.

Susan

April 29, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this [letter] I can report that we are well, thank God, and wish you the same from the bottom of our hearts. On Tuesday we received your letter of March 28 with your picture and the newspaper clipping. . . .

Things look very dark here. If there is no help from abroad we all face death from starvation. The winter wheat has been ploughed over and there is not enough spring wheat for seeding. . . . Whether it will produce anything is another question. There is always a lot of wind and on Thursday we had a cyclone. It was so

dark with dust that people had to light their lamps at 1 P.M. The rooms were so dusty that one choked. Perhaps now the people will see who is in charge, but their hearts are so hardened. On the day when the storm raged some thought it was the last judgement, others thought an earthquake was coming. Now they have calmed down. We don't know how much damage was done in the fields, there must have been a lot of soil drifting.

The storm did a great deal of damage. Malzel's roof was taken off, H. Horn's silo collapsed and the roof was blown off the barn. At J. Enns it was also the silo and the barn roof. . . .

The future is so dark for us. . . I don't want to think of living through another famine. They say it won't be gradual but sudden. The people are already buying porridge, but only the [collective] members can get it. Well we know how to get around it! Our cow is giving a lot of milk. We often have porridge with milk. We still have flour for a time and when the vegetables are ready we'll eat them. Who knows what May will bring -- perhaps something good for us?

People here are saying all kinds of things. So and so has got letters from there and there and they write this and that. . . . They say that those who have relatives over there have the best chance to leave. If only this were true and was implemented. One gets so tired and exhausted from all the dreaming. . . .

Enough. A warm greeting from us all. Wishing you all the best.

In love,

Your sister Susan

9

Sunday, May 13, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this letter I want to report that we are in good health, thank God which we also wish you with all our heart. Last week we received two letters from you. You have suddenly got a lot of letters which demand a lot of work from you. If you can't request our exodus because you are not a farmer there is not much else you can do. If it is the Lord's will that we leave here it will happen. We want to cling to this and believe it. We heard that last week two families left. When one hears that one almost panics. People leave and we sit here. It seems we have no possibility to leave.

We are so anxious and so tired of waiting. There is the long separation of a year and a half, and now the future appears so dark.

Many are already starving and many will soon run out of supplies. The prospect for a new harvest is poor because there is no rain. The spring wheat has not all germinated and won't if it doesn't rain. The vegetables also have not all germinated. The potatoes which we planted 5 weeks ago are beginning to come up.

Last week the poorest here received 5 pounds of flour per person per month. The Volhynians which live in Friedensdorf beyond Rosenort went to Halbstadt and wanted flour. They were told to go into people's attics and take as much as they wanted but of course they couldn't give them written authorization. Well let them come. We have bricks and the hedge contains enough sticks. They will have to deal with the women and woe to them if they try to enter the door. After all there are four of us. We've lived through one famine and don't want to endure another one. . . .

During the past week the Lichtenau people again made a deposit on their exit visas. If its nice tomorrow Agnes and I want to go to Blumenort and get what information is available. . . .

Father is working about the yard and reads the paper, Liese knits or patches, Mariechen knits. . . sister Agnes is spinning wool on a half and half basis. We've collected quite a lot of wool this way. We might even sell some, but not before fall or when we leave. Last fall it was 9 rubles a pound and it certainly won't be cheaper this fall because there are so few sheep. . . I and Mariechen are again gathering manure on the pasture for fuel since we have not bought any heating material as yet. . . .

Today there is a spring festival in the church. Father, Liese and Agnes went. Mariechen went to the children so that the sister-in-law could go. Last Sunday many choir members travelled to Halbstadt. The Halbstadt choir presented the life of Paul. A great many people came. The tin roof clattered the whole time because the storm a few days ago had damaged it. . . .

The trees are in full bloom. There could be a lot of fruit. The nightingale is singing beautifully.

Hoping for a reunion in the near future.

Your sister Susan

Sunday, May 27, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this letter I want to report that we are all well, thank God, and wish you the same with all our hearts. We received your letter of April 29 on May 25. You write that you cannot send us the papers. Please don't worry about it. Peter Baergs got us all excited about it, but as I learned from them the papers which their father sent them are in Moscow and they can't get them until they get their exit visa. Both they and we thought we would get the visa on the basis of the papers. . . As long as we can leave, I just can't think of staying here.

The people here torment and strain themselves and it all seems in vain. It has still not rained. The last potatoes we planted are coming up but the other vegetables have not all sprouted. We bought some cabbage plants and planted them and they're looking quite good. We constantly have to be on guard or Siemen's chickens are at them. What people don't take, the worms and chickens do. Many here are living from the flour they get from the co-operative. This flour is taken from those who had stockpiled some extra. In our village the farmers have not contributed anything as yet. They refused to do so. They have been threatened but no force has been used. If they try to use force they better look out for the women, for this time they are not going to accept it. . . .

In the past week we've heard a lot about what people over there write to their relatives here. If its true we should be glad things are so sad here because we'll be all the happier over there. But to live through all this here will be difficult.

The literary evenings and shows in the High School and farmer's club are deplorable. Yesterday evening the students presented a drama on utopia. If only we could live in it for a while it would be so helpful. The people always want something new. In a few years the children will know nothing more of God. In Sunday School there is such limited knowledge. Often the youngest can give the best answer. . . .

The day before yesterday several families again left for America, at least that is what B. told us. He had met them at the station. One after the other is leaving. When will our turn come? We trust God that our time will come.

We have bought materials for a dress for each of us. We want to make them according to the pattern book you sent us.

Your sister Susan

11

Sunday, June 10, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this letter I can report that we are well thank God. On June 5 we received your letters of May 8 and May 11. . . . Thank you so much for the picture of your beloved. We're not showing it to anyone not even brother P., otherwise the entire village will know it. . . .

Here many night visits are being made. They stole the [?] at D.J.s, a yearling at H.W., a small cultivator and leather at H.E. In Blumenort 12 hams were stolen at 3 places. Where will it all lead to? You ask if we still have sugar. Until now it has been readily available though some say this could suddenly end.

We had rain almost every day for an entire week. The vegetables are doing well. The corn on the field did not germinate very well. Wednesday we reseeded the sunflowers. Last week a great deal of rye was seeded.

Pentecost has come and gone and we forgot to wish you a blessed Pentecost. We were so preoccupied here. The inspectors were walking from house to house and checking the [grain in the] attics and confiscating what is left. How angry one becomes. They've done this at several farms and as long as men are involved there is not much fuss. When there are women involved then there are hot tempers. It already happened at several places. At R. she was imprisoned. . . .

We liked the fashion pictures which you sent us and we selected the dresses which we made from it. Even aunt Katja had one made at a seamstress who was impressed with the beautiful styles. If you have anymore you can send a page in your next letter. . . .

A warm greeting from us all. Wishing you all the best.

Your sister Susan

Sunday, June 24, 1928

Dear Gerhard:

Today is Sunday and because 14 days have passed since we wrote you the last letter I will try to fill this page. We are all well, thank God. We've had a busy week. We weeded the vegetable garden as well as the corn, sunflowers, beans, and melon patch in the field.

The vegetable garden is outstanding. Next week we want to pick a few cucumbers and cook a few green beans. It rained Friday. . . .

The people are concerned about the harvest. They have made it clear that the grain will be taken directly from the machine. The people live in perpetual fear. Last week a pair of colonist lads walked through the village and made visits. What a time we live in! At several homes they searched through everything, the cupboards and chest of drawers, each box and covered dish, the attics, the cellars, every bowl and pot. They even searched the straw, chaff, manure and ash pile in case something was hidden there. They say they are searching for wheat. . . They even climbed up the church attic to see if something was hidden there. It goes on like this day after day.

How many have already had to haul their feed grain away and even the flour, if they had any extra until the next harvest. . . . We have lived through one famine and do not want to think of living through a second. We still have enough to eat. What is not taken in the daytime is taken at night. Last week after the house inspection they cleaned out sister Grete's cellar during the night. . . it was the same at Dietrich R. . . . Someone said that whatever one did not have in ones' teeth disappears. The great Lord above will allow no more to happen than He wills.

Your comrades in [recruitment] categories 3, 4 and 5 have all left. They had to leave for the city on the 19th and who knows where from there. Seven of them were from our village. Who knows what they will eat. We are so thankful that you are over there.

Our cow gives a lot of milk. We drink it all and even make butter every week. Butter costs 40 kopecks and eggs 22 kopecks. In the co-operative they have been able to get everything until now, but that will end soon.

Even they can't do what they want. Who knows where it will end? Everything is out of kilter. Instead of tearing down mental institutions it would be better to build more because they all belong in them. Enough of this. One's head spins from it all. All this is

unknown to you over there. You don't even have to lock the door when you sleep or go away. . . .

Wishing you all the best and hoping to see you soon. I remain, with a warm greeting,

Your Susan

13

Sunday, July 22, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

I should like to report that we are all well, thank God, which we also wish for you with all our heart. On July 14 we received your letter of June 22 with the pictures of the children's picnic and the newspaper clippings. Until now everything has arrived. We have already received 59 pictures from you. . . .

Everything is confused here. One threshes a few loads of barley at home for bread and feed, another uses the machine for a few loads. Then the collective is to thresh the little spring wheat there is. Once its threshed it will all be gone for the tax is very high. Most will have to pay over 100 rubles. Where are they supposed to get it from? . . . On the fields there is stealing going on day and night. It seems the devil himself is on the loose. Now the farmers cannot press their own sunflower seeds. The collective will do it and then everyone will buy from the collective. We know what will happen. No one will get anything.

They have opened a beer hall on the Neufeld's farm. Last Sunday they consumed 200 bottles of beer and soft drinks. Whoever was not a drinker until now will become one. . . .

You write that you celebrate birthdays over there. During the coming winter ours here will be celebrated with barley bread. Butter costs 60 kopecks a pound, eggs 25 kopecks, beef 22 kopecks. Many cattle will be slaughtered before winter because there is no feed. . . . We have already picked cherries at sister Grete and canned them. Next week we want to cut up apples and pears [for drying]. . . .

When this letter arrives you will probably be engaged. We wish you all the best. Soon there will be the wedding. We're all for it. It doesn't look like we'll be coming in the near future. You've been living like a hermit and you can't even smile anymore. Listen, when you send the next picture we expect to see a happy face! Well your Lena will get you to smile. We wish you the best. Your

clothes and bedding no doubt need a woman's touch by now. . . .
With warmest greetings from us all.

In love,

Your sister Susan

14

Sunday, August 19, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this [letter] we want to report that we are all well, thank God. To date we have received all your letters with everything in them. We received your last letter of July 24 on August 13. It had simply been cut open and then sealed. They must have thought there were dollars inside. . . . It is not the first time this has happened. It is rare that a letter gets through unopened, usually the corners are torn. We got all the three needles as well as the fashion pages. We are so happy for this because then we know what the current styles are. . . .

The people here are in the midst of threshing but it will take a while yet because most of the millet has not been cut yet. There is a great deal of fruit this year and the people are selling a great deal. Pears are 90 kopecks to 1²⁰ a pud, apples 1⁵⁰, apricots up to 3 rubles a pud. They are a hot item. The people are also trading them for ducks and geese; a duck for a pud. We have already dried a great many.

We are also collecting manure [for fuel]. We've already gathered 75 baskets. Fuel is going to be expensive and difficult to obtain this winter.

You ask about the recruits. They are: Heinrich W.; Jakob Hiebert; W. Wiens; Johann Janz; David Hiebert; Johann Mierau; Johann A. Neufeld. They have to construct a mound for bridge building. They're getting on alright but are carefully watched. There are those among them who belong to the other party: they want to take the weapon. There is Tiessen from Orenburg for example who has breathed in a lot of bad air in Halbstadt. He comes to the ministers and complains that he was not explicitly told [about nonresistance] and yet wants to remain in the church. There are a lot of his type and there will be more.

Today there is a harvest and thanksgiving festival in the Lichtenau church. In Tiege there is a farewell service. Their minister,

Peter Friesen, who came from the Kuban one and a half years ago is going back. The church cannot give him what he wants. Well, the main thing is that he is not straight laced enough for them and has too much fellowship with the other Mennonites. He is a very intelligent man in his forties. During the winter evenings he spoke about God's plan from the creation of the world to God's thousand year reign. . . .

Here in the co-operative, ready made mens clothing and coats are available, but most people don't have any money. There is a great deal of stealing. . . .

We so long to get away. We have sent two petitions to Melitopol. Last week we received word that we were to apply to two addresses in Kharkov. Will it help? Our experience is like the children of Israel: the Lord hardened the hearts. But the time will come when Pharaoh will let the people go. We believe this firmly. . . . P. Bergs got a second rejection. If the door should suddenly open the people will swarm out like flies. . . .

Wishing you all the best. May we see each other soon.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

15

Sunday, September 2, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

With this letter I want to report that we are all well. We received your letter of July 31 on August 20 and your next letter on August 31. They arrived undamaged and with all their enclosures.

So you were engaged 14 days ago? We warmly congratulate you. You write that you might be married on September 23. We wish you God's richest blessing in your marriage and warmly welcome our new sister-in-law. We would love to be there but since that is not possible you will have to be content with our best wishes. We are always so happy for your pictures, at least they let us look into your eyes. You have been gone for two years and it does not look like we're going to be getting out.

This week we bought half a *Faden*¹ of manure for 10 rubles.

¹A measure akin to a cord of wood.

This together with what we have picked up should last us through the winter. We want to place an iron stove in the middle of the room and use it for cooking as well. We are getting the stove from F. Friesen. It is a church stove which they don't need. . . .

We have processed most of the fruit. The sunflowers and the corn will be ripe in 2 or 3 weeks, which means we'll be helping the rest of the family. We are already eating watermelons. . . .

Most of the children in the village and several adults have whooping cough. There is such a barking that people don't need a watchdog. Its pitiful to hear how they have to suffer.

Today is a dark, gloomy day. Our landlord and several others from the village went to Tokmak to buy wheat and rye. As if six days of work aren't enough, they also have to work on the seventh. Next week they want to start threshing again, but it will probably not be finished in one week, since the millet has not been cut yet. . . .

The school is supposed to begin here in the near future but the students have nothing to write on. Currently no paper is available. We're told that in the cities they're writing around the edges of used paper. Yet in the papers we read that we've exported writing paper. We will be able to write four more letters then we have to stop. . . .

A warm greeting from us all to you and your dear bride.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

16

September 23, 1928

Dear brother Gerhard:

Three weeks have passed since I sent my last letter and so I must remedy the delay. We received your letter of August 15, 19 on September 10. Everything was inside including Lena's large picture. . . . My dear boy we are glad and thankful for your happiness. We can see it on your picture. May the Father in heaven grant you the happiness which you seek. Another week and you are no longer alone and abandoned, something which always bothered me. . . .

A busy week is behind us. For two days, we chopped sunflower stems on D. Koop's land and brought them home. We got them for nothing since they don't need them for heating. The three of

us, brother P., Agnes and I worked together and shared equally. We want to use them for the bake stove since straw is too expensive, not under 15 rubles a load, and almost impossible to get. We also have to cut our own sunflowers, some three loads. We have two loads of corn to bring home. Then I, Agnes and Mariechen cut down all the corn straw. I used the knife, Agnes the hoe, and Mariechen had to make the piles. You should have seen us. It was hard work, but we had to do it if we want anything at all [for the coming winter]. Liese had to look after everything at home. . . .

When Mr. Bartel was here the last time he looked at some of your pictures. He liked them. He said that people could still walk straight over there, while here everyone is stooped and oppressed. The expenses are so high and they can sell so little grain. Yet half of the tax is to be paid this month. You ask do we still have enough to eat? Yes thank God we do even if its barley bread. If only there was enough sugar. The co-operative hasn't had any for 14 days and they are not sure whether they will get any. We have 18 pud of potatoes in the cellar and have also bought millet flour. At least we won't have to starve. We eat watermelons every day. . . .

There are 70 students in the High School and 20 in the village school. The teacher thinks he has a hard time of it. Maybe he is right. Its very difficult to be a teacher at the present. In our day people could never learn enough. Nowadays they are told to go play outside and not to learn too much. If the advanced students are asked a question which formerly one knew during the first years they stand with their mouths a gap! The question is beyond their comprehension.

If the weather remains nice for the next 14 days and we are well, most of the preparations for winter will have been made. We want to work outside as much as we can. Inside the home a large pile of torn socks await us. If any one of us goes out we always come home with another bag of them. Then we glance at each other with that "Don't you think we have enough?" look. Sometimes it seems as if we only knit and spin. . . .

How we wish that we could all leave here, the longing to get over there grows steadily stronger. How we would love to be at your wedding but its not possible. We have to remain quiet and wait for the hour when God says we can go.

Best wishes and greetings from all of us to you and your Lena.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

You loved ones over there:

Three weeks have passed since our last letter and so we want to write again. . . .

We are still very busy. Mariechen is active in the house, Liese sews and patches for others and I helped to cook syrup. . . the neighbors gave us small watermelons. I helped them preserve theirs and they gave me some in return. We have enough watermelons, cucumbers and tomatoes in the cellar. They're both sweet and sour, just as our inner life can be. Externally our life is sour, bitter and difficult. The pressure is so great we fear we will be squashed. We are so exhausted and one day is like the other. When we see them coming we already begin to shake. Pay and pay some more When will it finally end? When will the Lord's hour come?

Much has happened here recently. How can one comprehend a mother leaving her children and disappearing under cover of darkness. Our neighbor disappeared on the evening September 22. She often came to our house and gossiped incessantly. Lately she was very agitated. When we got up in the morning they told us she had vanished. I wasn't surprised because she had spoken of this earlier, yet somehow I hadn't expected it to happen. Her husband left the day before on business. Towards evening someone came and demanded to see her husband. Because he was not there he demanded she come. Sensing danger she vanished and has still not been heard from. There is also no trace of him. The children, one aged 9 and twins aged 5 are with their auntie across the street. The reason [for this escape] of course relates to the fact that they were being offered "free" room and board. Her sister had already been imprisoned for several weeks. Yes this is what happens to people who cannot keep their mouth shut and always say exactly what they think. Sometimes I tell [our] sister Liese that this will happen to her with all her complaining. . . .

In the near future there is to be a great deal of moving around in the village. One person wants this house, the other that one. In others words they don't know what they want. Everything is supposed to be better and yet its just the reverse. In the neighboring village three silos have been demolished in order to heat the hospital, but there is not enough wood. They say they need at least 15,000 pud. If they had coal they would need 3,000 pud, but it is not available. And with what are they going to heat the other large buildings. There is enough manure for fuel but it has not been prepared because of lack of time. . . .

So you've bought an automobile. We're very happy for you. Please send us a picture of it. And when you drive, don't drive too fast. You could have an accident. Here the vehicles are hauling grain, watermelons, cabbage, tomatoes and pumpkins -- much of it to the station. . . .

Pray for us that we might remain courageous and strong in the face of evil. We need strength from above for this. The people are being pressured as never before. May the Lord keep you vital and in good health -- that is our wish and prayer. Once again all our best wishes.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

18

October 28, 1928

Dear loved ones:

Its three weeks since I sent you the last letter and so I'd better try to write. Its Sunday forenoon and I am alone at home. It is a dark day. In 14 days we've only seen the sun once. . . .

We're still very busy. Sister Liese has spent the entire day cooking and sewing at Riedigers. Grete has a sore hand and is at home. . . . Agnes is spinning, Mariechen is knitting for others and I'm sewing shirts for Riediger's children. Father is cleaning up. Our days are filled [with activity], one day like the next. . . .

Yesterday the people hardly knew where to go. There was a bridal shower and an evening in the High School. The themes which were portrayed were the fall and utopia. Then there was a buffet, which in these times is the most important thing: buttered bread; cheese, sausage and tea. On such occasions everyone seems to have money. Today there is horse racing in Halbstadt and all the fans have gone there. . . .

We have set up the iron stove in the middle of the room. We cook everything on it and always have a warm room. The aunties often come here to warm up. . . .

Next week the pig and cattle slaughtering will begin. Many people are simply short of feed. Currently it is very difficult to get anything in the store because they are out of everything. . . . Butter costs 70 kopecks a pound, eggs 40 kopecks. Pork or lamb is 25 kopecks [a pound], beef 18 kopecks. This winter we want to eat a

great deal of millet porridge which we have in good supply. We eat watermelon and fruit everyday. . . .

Peter Baerg was asked to go to Melitopol on account of the exit visas. . . We are waiting daily for an answer to our petition but so far we have not heard a thing. P. Baerg applied a few days before us and has now been notified. He will go today to see about the matter. One becomes so tired struggling with all these matters. Waiting, gathering patience again and again. Then we hear so and so has got his visa, then some one else. Yet we sit here as though we were the greatest criminals. . . .

We are in good health and wish you all the same. Be well.

In heartfelt love,

Your sister Susan

19

Sunday, November 18, 1928

Dear loved ones:

Wishing you the best of health in body and soul which, thank God, we also enjoy. We got your letter of October 11 on November 2 and your letter of October 28 on November 16. All the letters have arrived so far, though the last 5 had been cut open. . . .

Today P. Baergs are leaving Blumenort for America. They got their exit visas 14 days ago. What lucky people. . . If they are gracious to us, as they are to many at present, we will be able to get there for winter. We should know something in about a week and a half. We would so like to leave. Almost the entire village has America fever. Even those who were formerly so opposed want to leave, but I think for many its just a passing cloud of dust. Many pigs and cattle have been slaughtered, first, because there is no feed, secondly, because many are without food, and thirdly, because cattle are so cheap. An ordinary cow costs 25 rubles. . . .

People here are currently cutting wood. Many trees have been cut down. Some cut for their own use, others in order to sell. A pud of wood costs 40 kopecks. We have enough and don't have to buy. Our room is warm. . . .

On Tuesday brother P. is going to the city to pay for the exit visas, provided we get word from Kharkov that our new papers are ready. The old ones are no longer valid. We had to take new

photographs. . . if only we could get out of this mouse hole.

Wishing you all the best and a warm greeting from us all.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

20

Thursday, December 6, 1928

Dear loved ones:

Wishing you the best of health in body and soul, which we also enjoy. We've had one day of rain after another. . . we can hardly leave the house because its so muddy on the sidewalks, and the people make little effort to keep them up. On Sunday and Monday there was a Bible Conference here on James Chapter I. Because of the muddy conditions not many came from elsewhere. Brother P. and Woelk preached in Rosenort for two days and made house visitations. . . .

Fourteen days ago we again paid for our exit visas. They are to let us know whether we can go or not in early January. We have received no word from Kharkov even though five weeks have passed. We shall soon write to them again. They shall not forget us until we are satisfied!

People here are busily preparing for Christmas. I have already knit some gloves for Christmas. I'll do this as long as the people come early, not like last year where they wanted all sorts of things done a few days before Christmas. . . Since a Christmas Eve for the children is not allowed in the church the people want to celebrate in the homes. There is a teacher here in the High School who is causing a great deal of commotion. Things will be even worse by spring for the young people are simply out of control. It is very sad. Gerhard R. who is attending school in Gnadenfeld has also been affected by this and there are many others like him.

The people want to leave here, but they, like we, are delayed month after month. We are truly children of Israel. . . .

In the co-operative they are mainly dealing in bread, wine and sweets. Whoever has a few kopecks spends them for these. The first is of course essential, the others produce drunkards and that is a great evil. The people here live in perpetual fear. They will again come into the attics to inspect how much everyone has. Then there are the assessments, which are supposedly voluntary, but when

it comes to paying them its give or else. We don't want to think of last winter. May the Lord soon get us out of here, we don't want to live through this again. . . .

Sister Agnes wants to spin until Christmas. That is quite enough. I told her if it was our spinning wheel I would have already smashed it. The rest of us knit or sew. . . .

A warm greeting from us all.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

21

Thursday, December 27, 1928

Dear loved ones:

Three weeks have passed since we sent our last letter to you and so I want to write to you again. This time you'll have to be content with my letter, for father has been sick for a week with the flu and malaria. He also has a terrible cough which has plagued him for an entire month. . . Yesterday his temperature dropped and his cough is less. He'll still have to stay in bed for a week. You can see from this that we did not have the happiest Christmas. Things are so different here now that it does not seem like Christmas. They celebrated Christmas Eve in the church with a Christmas tree, which was not allowed. The ministers, brother P. and K. did it anyway. They simply say the authorities have no right to interfere in these matters. They had also forbidden anyone under 18 years to enter the church. That's all the people needed. The more they prohibited, the more people brought their children. There were no songs, verses or goodies, however. Several of the teachers, out of fear, do not have a Christmas tree in their homes. In any case if they have a bit of conscience left, they will soon leave their jobs.

Here the concern is leaving, otherwise we all perish. In the city they can't even close the visa offices on holidays because of the potential emigrants. If the door should open in the new year the exodus will be greater than ever before. One observes and hears this every day. . . .

Many beggars, wanderers and gypsies have come to the door during these last days. They were still able to get something at a few places.

The spinning has finally stopped. Now we want to just sit and wait for our exit visas. Will it be in vain? I can't quite trust brother P.'s optimism. We've had so many disappointments yet he is full of hope. Well we'll see. . . .

Wishing you all the best. May the Lord grant us a reunion in the new year.

In love as always,

Your sister Susan

Susan's letters appear to lack their customary scrutiny and vigor during this year. There is almost a sense of detachment from the steadily intensifying economic pressures experienced by the farmers in the village and the increasing social and religious discontinuity everywhere evident. Economically there are the grain requisitions and the reports of farmers hauling away "their last surplus wheat." Essential wares and foodstuffs are in critically short supply. Here and there people are ordered to vacate their homes on short notice. They are occasionally allowed to hold auctions before they are exiled, but other than that are "chased into the big wide world". As the harvest commences all the grain is taken directly to the station. There are no reserves and Susan predicts that if things continue as they are "there will be no living person here in spring".

As in the previous year Susan comments on the ongoing disintegration of the social and religious fabric of the community. Churches are seized and turned into reading halls or clubs because the impossibly high tax assessment cannot be paid. For many, especially the youth, the club is replacing the church. Catechism instruction in preparation for baptism and the fundamentals of faith reveals widespread ignorance of the Scripture. Those who wish to remain nonresistant must plead their case before the court in Melitopol. There is increased disruption of the traditional Christian festivals. Susan speaks of a "fractured holiday" during the Easter season in which everything seemed "pell-mell".

Toward the end of the year another event further "fractures" the life of this Mennonite family. In October thousands of German colonists, most of them Mennonite, leave their villages throughout Russia and travel to Moscow seeking exit visas. Susan's family is also caught up in the mass hysteria. It is a last minute decision. Susan's letter of October 22 gives no hint of any anticipated journey to Moscow. By November father Jakob informs Gerhard that almost everything has been sold and that they are about to leave. By November 10 they are sharing a house with nine other families in Moscow, all of whom are waiting for their exit visas. Father Jakob's brief note of December 25 concludes the saga. After spending nine days in a freight car with 30-40 other people they returned home from Moscow on December 22.

Sunday, February 3, 1929

Dear loved ones:

I want to write to you again since it is almost three weeks since I wrote my last letter to you. Your letter of January 1 arrived on January 23. We note that one letter has again been lost and that you have been ill. I sincerely wish you are all well again. Thank God we are also well, though coughing and sniffles seem to be the order of the day. What else can we expect? It is terribly cold here, up to minus 16. The fire burns constantly but the windows do not clear up. On top of this there is wind. We all sit around the stove to warm ourselves. Hopefully the winter is soon at an end.

Liese was very ill. She had pneumonia and for two days we wondered whether she would pull through. She is so pale and thin and her eyes are so large. She will have to remain inside for some time. . . .

Yesterday Prof. Lindemann died in the hospital here. There will be quite a scene at the funeral. Yet it is very sad when one lives and dies without God and is buried without music or the ringing of bells. When someone wanted to read to him from the Bible or relate something from it, he said that he, an old man, ought to be spared [the ordeal]. In the recent past he was quite blind and very deaf. Currently the doctors are very busy because there are so many illnesses. At present we have a miserable fellow as a doctor. He is such a philistine and doesn't know very much.

Here we are living in a very difficult time. Many are already starving and freezing to boot. There is still bread to buy but it won't be long and that will end as well. It is brought in from Lichtenau everyday and whoever is there first gets some and the others are frustrated. Brown bread costs 12 kopecks a pound and white bread 16 kopecks a pound. Ten eggs currently cost 53 kopecks. The cheapest butter in Blumenort costs 2⁸⁰ a kilo. If you want to buy all of that and live well you have to possess a large pocketbook. But what if you don't have anything? Now they write in the papers that no one is starving and no one will starve as in 1922. At that time so and so was at fault, but now we have enough bread. Yet when the crisis comes it will be worse than it was at that time and many more will die. Who will be at fault then? None other than the priest and the *kulak*. According to what they say these are now the biggest thieves and robbers. Thievery is a daily affair here and it is remarkable that no one hears anything about the robberies. The storage cellars are most frequently visited, then the chicken and pig barns. They kill them

on the spot and away they are.

Fourteen days ago we had an election. That was a tense day for the men and naturally also for several women without whom, some thought, nothing could function. We received several notifications and even a special order but we did not move from the spot. Such pressure was simply not tolerable, and we resolved to keep up our nerve. I often had to think of that verse: ". . . nor sits in the seat of scoffers". It is really terrible to live among such people. Sometimes one should like to shake everything off and run away but that's not possible. What if such scoffers no longer have a way out, what do they do then? Not long ago and not far from here one such fellow committed suicide. At another location one was called from this world while scoffing. How dreadful that awakening must be! There is no stopping it. The more preaching there is against it, the more they are bent on destruction.

Now there is youth instruction here but the young people know so little. If they are to locate the Gospel of Luke many search in the Old Testament and do not find it. They always have to bring their Bible and catechisms with them for the majority today know so little that its sad. There are also those who rarely take a book in their hand after school. Now [with youth instruction] they have to be diligent and its very necessary for them. A little break -- I must go eat lunch.

Now to continue. That was delicious -- we had sausage soup. Do you ever make it? Its probably the last time we will have it this year. What else shall I write? My head is so full of things and yet I can't seem to say anything decent!

Some time ago the farmers here hauled away their last surplus wheat. Well whether its really the last time -- there will probably be some other sort of compulsion. The best horses and cattle are being bought. Many coal wagons daily pass in the direction of Lichtenau. Who knows where its all going? While we are being kept in the dark we are not as stupid as we often pretend to be. Yet if a person here is really stupid all the better -- he is placed on a pedestal, that is until he is disgraced. As someone said: "It was very interesting, everyone laughed but I didn't understand a thing". These sort of weeds are growing in abundance. I think you know what I mean.

Today and tomorrow there is a Bible Conference in the Tiege Church. The Brethren Church is studying the book of Ephesians. Tiege again has a resident minister since October, a certain Penner from Lichtfelde. He tells them a few more things than the previous one who, they felt, was not strict enough. We cannot go because it is too cold. Brother P. will tell us how it was.

You ask if we still know how to knead bread -- yes we still do

-- but father calls it groat bread since normally only pigs are fed on this in order to gain weight. It does not stick to humans. Instead they get stomach pains from it and lose weight. We eat a great deal of millet porridge and as you know we all like it. Now we have lovely milk to go with it. We have it for supper almost every day. We also have enough potatoes so we don't have to complain as far as food is concerned. It's certainly not as well prepared as earlier, but when one is hungry it still tastes good. Beggars no longer come except for Ediger who goes from house to house and begs for a piece of bread, not just dry bread but bread with butter or lard on it. They cannot keep him at home so he wanders about on the streets or begs or frightens the children, who go far out of his way. It is a sad existence is it not?

You write that you had fine weather New Year's Eve. We were astounded when we came out of church. It seemed as if we were walking directly into the ocean, everything was under water. We were glad when we finally got home. Mind you it was more tolerable than this cold, where one is only warm in bed. We simply do not have the warm clothes we had formerly, the stores are virtually empty. Manufactured goods, leather, nails, thread can only be purchased in our store with grain and whoever does not have any can freeze and walk barefoot. They will not or cannot give anything. The wares are of such poor quality. They do not last even if they are expensive. The thread is so fine (no. 80) and comes only in black. And then one is to be quiet like a lamb and not protest. I'm sure that's unheard of out your way.

Lena has decided not to write. You think we are soon coming but we do not know when that will be. There are a few lucky ones who now and then get to go, but we do not belong to them as yet. When we got the Christmas cards we were a bit disappointed that there wasn't a bit of paper (a letter) tucked inside, but you were sick so I don't hold it against you. If only this letter writing could finally stop. It would be ten times better to talk with you. If we ever get there it will be so wonderful to talk with you.

I want to close with hearty greeting to you.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, March 10, 1929

Dear loved ones:

Though it is only eight days ago since we sent our last letter to you I still want to write and report what I overlooked. . . . It is still cold here even though its March 10. There is a great deal of wind and one day is as the other. Last night it snowed so much that today people are riding about in sleighs. This morning there was 3° of frost.

Many terrible things have happened here in the recent past. About three weeks ago a 19 year old, Miss Loetkemann hanged herself in Halbstadt because of a love affair. One week ago the son of the local post master shot himself in Prischib. About one year ago he suddenly vanished. Some said he went to America. Because they received no word from him his parents thought he was already there. He left a letter behind in which he tells all. He had been in Siberia and who knows where. He tried to cross the border in various places but without success. Finally after all the misfortunes he ended his life. It was a very sad funeral. One can say that, in the main, it was conducted according to the German custom. Naturally the priest had his ceremony and then they went to the cemetery. The coffin was made in the German style. At the cemetery the priest gave a sermon from the Bible, then Mr. Nickel spoke in Russian. Then, before the grave was closed, a German chorale was sung. The parents had requested this. He was 24 years old. It is horrible to come to such an end but whoever doesn't have a hold on God and is led on evil ways by others, despairs as this man did. But enough of this.

Father and the sisters are reading while I write this. Thursday was father's birthday. We had many guests: the P. Toews; the Abram Riedigers (both couples); sister Anna and her son P.; Mrs. W. W.; Mr. Mierau (he came by wagon because he has difficulty walking, he is also short of breath); finally there were Johann Klassens from Muensterberg, for whom no distance is too great. Their daughter Liese is not well and is confined to bed. The Spenses are well and healthy. The new mother is still young and can work hard. If only the children treated their stepmother better. She is a good mother. Grete already did what she wanted with her real mother and she certainly won't change now. . .

This week many received an exit visa refusal from Melitopol. Who knows what this all means. Someone in Rosenart said that even if we are refused we will leave in spring. But what can one do? We've tried everything we can and it looks so hopeless. Well

we have learned patience. We don't know how long it will still take. You write that we should hustle. If that were the crux of the matter we would have left here long ago. . .

Don't you celebrate Easter in one month? We wish you a happy and blessed Easter. Also a belated birthday wish for Lena. Enough! Wishing you all the best and a warm greeting from us all.

Your sister Susan

3

Friday, March 29, 1929

Dear loved ones:

Since father has already written I will see if I can fill up this page. It is not as difficult for me as for you. Once I start writing the page is soon full. Unlike Agnes and Marie I don't have to ask: "What shall I write?"

Currently we are experiencing cloudy, dull weather, one day like the next. We don't get to see the sun. Since Sunday there has been no ice on the windows. We will be so happy when we're finally able to get into the garden, but we'll be even happier when we can finally leave here. One hardly knows what to do for longing. The people are saying all kinds of things. If only they were true. It sometimes seems an impossible thing to live here, at times it appears as if everything is going to come crashing down upon one's head. People are steadily becoming crazier. You cannot imagine what kind of ideas they have and yet they think they know and understand everything. In my estimation they simply belong in an asylum. Yet one has to witness all of this and remain silent. Yesterday evening Mrs. Dr. Dirks gave a talk in the community hall about a certain disease. She was probably forced or else she would not have done it. A large sum has been levied upon Dr. W. Dirks and his wife. They do not want to pay and he has already been in Simferopol on this account. They want to leave here and have applied for a transfer. Whether they will be allowed to leave is another question. They torment people here, whether they be a doctor, dentist, farmer or whoever else. If people still have something it will be taken away.

Today a second self-assessment is to be delivered to the collective granary. It is for the poor but whether they will get a single kernel of it is doubtful for they are to get the surplus grain. The cattle are supposed to live on straw and chaff. Do you think that's possible? The horses are to work on the fields during

seeding time without oats. These are the clever people that we have here now and we are all stupid by comparison with them. Things are so gloomy here among us that we sometimes wonder whether there will ever be another ray of light in this life.

On Tuesday we celebrated sister Ann's birthday. There were quite a few guests. Her family is steadily shrinking. Hans works at Bartels and David wants to go to Samara next week in order to avoid service, since the young men there have not been drafted. Thiessen from Orenburg has again moved into his home village with his family. Heinrich Wiebe is already there and if he finds a suitable position his wife and child are to follow him. Many have already done this and more will, if only they don't have to do [military] service. Our Dr. Schmidt does not want to stay here any longer since everyone is going to Dr. Dirks. Well it won't be a big loss, he is not much good. Apparently he is returning to the colonists where he was before. We've probably been spoiled with all the doctors we've had here. If Dr. Dirks leaves all the nurses will go as well as the house parents. That will be a fine mess. The mill in Muensterberg will be operating until April 1, then it too stops. Some say they want to tear it down and build elsewhere.

The students are on spring vacation now but are only creating mischief. In our day we never heard of such a thing. Gnadenfeld students like Walter Ed. and a certain W. walked from house to house and asked how much grain each person had. At one place they climbed to the attic [to search for grain] which they were not allowed to do. Many a swear word was hurled after them. But that's the way things are and can't be changed. . . .

When we come we don't quite know what to do with the books. Shall we bring the song and hymnbooks? Please let us know if you need them. We will bring as many of the other books as possible. We have been advised to leave our Bibles since there are none to be had here and they are readily available over there. And what do you think of bringing the wood working tools? Please write us soon as possible in case we leave. We received a rejection from Melitopol. The answer to our petition to Kharkov was ambivalent. We have applied for the fourth time but have not yet received an answer. Well that's the way things go. We firmly hope that it (emigration) will finally happen. As you heard big Cornies recently received his pass. How lovely it will be to come there in spring or summer. It is hard to imagine how wonderful that will be. Sometimes we have the feeling that we are imprisoned. . . .

With a warm greeting to both of you from us all.

In love,

Your sister Susan

Friday, May 3, 1929

Dear loved ones:

We received your letter of March 15 on April 17 -- and your letter of April 7 yesterday, May 2. Your letters take longer to get here than ours do. So far they have all arrived, including the wedding pictures which we like very much. They arrived undamaged which rarely happens. Thank you so much.

So you have become a farmer. Well that's right down your line. I often wondered why you didn't do it sooner. Hopefully you will soon be settled in. We were very happy that you moved to where there were orchards. Since we moved out of our home we have not lacked either work or food but have missed the garden more than anything else. Though it meant a lot of work and effort we enjoyed it so much. We planted our vegetables a week ago and they are already beginning to sprout. We planted two pud of potatoes and kept one pud for eating. We planted our vegetables at Unruhs, Hieberts and Riedigers. That's a spread out farm isn't it? We won't eat a lot of vegetables this summer.

The farmers got on to the fields on April 23. A bit late to be sure but it wasn't possible earlier. Even if we're planting, we don't want to harvest. We would much rather come to you. The interest and enthusiasm for work is lacking here. One fulfills ones obligations but that is about all. The winter wheat has failed. The people are too evil, no blessing rests upon the fields. They take everything away and who knows what they will think of next? When the seeding time is past they will probably take the last kernel from the attic. Many, including some here in the village, are already starving. Yet some want it that way. When they have something they gorge themselves continuously and when they have nothing they starve and complain that the farmers are so cruel. This is what happens to those who know no moderation. If someone wants to hire them for 80 kopecks per day its too little. . . .

Bread, which is still available from time to time is very expensive. Brown bread, with everything mixed in, costs 13 kopecks a pound. In the city a small white bun costs 10 kopecks. A pud of white flour costs 24 rubles. In fall there were those, even among the farmers, who said they would not eat barley bread and now that it is not available -- well that's the difficulty. Buying is not always a matter of having money. Bread is only available if the baker gets flour. According to the papers we live happily and gloriously, but all the while sink deeper in the mire. But what can you expect if

you want to do everything without God? How can there be a blessing? Here the party spokesman with seven years of trade school education wanted to celebrate the first of May. He had few listeners. He could not force anyone to come and no intelligent person would attend such a gathering. Most of the children in the village school are down with the measles. The village is full of it, especially where there are small children. . . .

There is a meeting in Kharkov on May 16 which is to decide whether we can leave or not. I always go to Riedigers to check on the matter. He is always so hopeful. He says if not before the harvest, then certainly afterwards. Only time will tell. . . .

You wonder who has received help from abroad here. We only know of brother P. who received 10 dollars three weeks ago and a few days ago received another 10 dollars from the Board. Then in February our aunts received 10 dollars from their sister-in-law. The old grandmother here at D. Janzens received several drafts from Wall's children. I don't know of anyone else, at least we haven't heard anything . . . we wish you a happy and blessed Pentecost. . . .

Your sister Susan

5

Tuesday, May 21, 1929

Dear loved ones:

Three weeks have already passed since we sent you the last letter and so I will write again. We received your letter of April 21 on May 14 and the one from May 9 on May 20. Until now we have received all your letters.

Much has happened here during the last several weeks but most of it is not pleasing. On Good Friday evening just after we mailed your letter, Peter Cornies received notification that he was to leave house and home within five days. In a word he was being chased out. They had a large auction on the last holiday of Easter. They sold everything and did quite well. The next day they left for Memrik. The aunties were also asked to leave. There was a lot of fuss about their furniture which was kept in the second story. The populace says it belongs to the Cornies so the upper story and the entire house has been sealed. Yesterday Mrs. Wedel had an auction and today is travelling into the big wide world. She too had to leave within five days. Yesterday evening her daughter was

married to a Molokan.

The mother is taking two children with her. The other two are going to Taschenak, but they have breathed too much of the new air in the schools and have been raised accordingly. Jakob Neufelds have already held one auction. They have only retained the main building, the others are already sold before they are exiled. Many more are to leave here. First the former estate owners and then the rest. There are to be no people left which call anything their own or better put, have owned anything at one time. The populace does not realize that if no one works any longer they too will have nothing. Now it's still a question of taking. They say there is still plenty and so they allow themselves to be fed by those who work. One is to remain silent and cheerfully give. Do you think that's possible? At times ones bile wants to overflow, but its of no use. And think one is not even free of work on Sunday. As if there were not six work days! On Sunday the pigs and cows were inoculated. And so it continues day after day. They think that here in this progressive land every day must be utilized. In the papers they write that we have already surpassed the pre-war period. What do you think about that?

Here many churches and houses of worship have been turned into reading halls and clubs and other things. Here in the German villages many families have been driven from house and home. Some, thanks to the bad elements in the village, had to leave within ten hours. Easter was already such a fractured holiday and who knows what will happen at Pentecost. Will we have been chased into the big wide world? Anything is possible. People who still have a bit of conscience live in constant fear. It's little wonder. They have just finished planting and then they must leave in utmost haste. Yesterday Mrs. Wagenknecht finally arrived here. She came alone for her husband did not dare accompany her. It is better this way, yet it would have been even better if she had remained where she was rather than return to this den of thieves. Her mother is here and has been supported with provisions by others for the entire winter. . . .

Of your comrades in our village Jakob H. and Johann Neufeld were freed after they appeared before the Commission. D.H. is in Samara; Johann H., W.W. and H.W. are no longer nonresistant as you have probably heard. The ministers have decided to excommunicate these from the church. . . What do you think of this? In your day was there not more unity among the young men?. . .

The sheet is full again. Even though I haven't written much that is substantial you at least know how we're getting on. In nature everything is so beautiful, but a person cannot be happy if

things continue as they have during the last 14 days. Enough! We wish you all the best in body and in soul.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

6

Tuesday June 11, 1929

Dear loved ones:

Since it is exactly three weeks since we sent you our last letter I will write again. Thank God we are well. I have little desire to write but it has to be. We live in such an evil world here that one becomes completely discouraged. I'd rather not write but feel I must. We're in the center of it and have to go with the flow regardless of how difficult it is. We are so used to it that if things should suddenly change we would not know what to do.

Yesterday another family was expelled -- Wiens who were formerly from Hochfeld. They were living with widow P. Regehr. Now they went to the Bachmut region. Who knows who is next? Then there is another thing which is depressing. By June 20 our village is to deliver 300 pud of grain. Where is it supposed to come from? If it cannot be collected then its value in money is to be paid. And they will do it, that much we have learned.

Easter was already such a pell-mell and Pentecost will probably be worse. There are also various activities on Sunday like inoculating the cattle and pigs. The people have already become so indifferent that no one is much concerned. They are sinking steadily into the mire before vanishing. That's the situation here and so you can imagine what our disposition is. . . .

We are soon to pay a great deal [of tax] for the church. The sum is steadily raised until we can no longer pay. Then they will use the church for something else, so much is certain. This has happened at many places in the recent past. One of these types told one of our church goers that it was not raining because we were attending church. The reason is of course the opposite: it would rain if people were not so evil. It is very dry here. It has not rained for five weeks and the grain and vegetables are suffering terribly. There will be very little fruit. At our landlord's the apple trees are one [huge] worm nest with no leaves. . . .

The main thing is that we get our passes. We have not heard

of anyone who has got his pass from abroad but there is much talk here that only such will be allowed to leave. But this is not the first time they have lied. When the time comes they will chase us out like they did the Children of Israel. We firmly believe this.

Last week 10 rubles sent through the Board were received by a number of people, including us. J. Neufeld cashed them for us. Again, don't worry about us, things will happen as they have been ordained. The time will come when we will again be able to rejoice.

I want to close. Wishing you all the best. With warm greetings to you.

I remain,

Your sister Susan

P.S. Yesterday three wagons took the Kornies archive to Halbstadt. The day after tomorrow on Ascension Day, Vladimir Janzen is to be ordained.

7

Sunday June 30, 1929

Dear loved ones:

With this we want to wish good health in body and soul, which, thank God we also enjoy. A week ago we celebrated Pentecost. On the second festive day there was a baptism in our church. There were 12 young men and 10 young women. The church was filled to capacity.

We received your last letter of May 31 with the picture on June 24. Now we can see where you live. Lena has flowers standing by the window which pleases us so much. This summer we have many flowers outside, but those we had in pots froze because it got so cold inside. Then too we have lost some of our enthusiasm [for flowers] for things are getting steadily worse and the people are so tormented. Work and effort is of no avail since everything is taken away. If it continues this way they will tear the last shirt from the body for they are raging tigers. First there had to be 300 pud of grain, now there are to be another 200. If not, another five farms will be taken. The people are simply driven from house and home. They don't care what happens to them, as long as they can torment them. There are many here in the village that are quite happy

about this for they erroneously think something will then remain for them. They can go back to where they came from. In the store there is almost nothing left. There is no salt for example and so we will soon have to eat everything unsalted. No sugar, no salt, no manufactured goods, no thread. If you want thread, they say, a factory will be built in fall. Then when it's completed years from now, if it's built at all, you will have thread. Not long ago we wanted paper. They laughed and said there was no paper to be had. Even the newspapers will have to stop. What do you think of that? But that is the way it is with everything. . . .

The furniture which the aunties had in the second story is still locked up. Though they have travelled to Halbstadt and Melitopol, and though [officials] in Melitopol ordered the house opened, Halbstadt and local village officials refuse to do so. What can two such women do against a whole mob? . . .

Reimer's farm is almost demolished. Six tractors are daily hauling the roof tiles and timbers to the sheep farm where a new structure is being built. . . .

With a warm greeting from us all. Wishing you all the best.

I remain,

Your sister Susan

8

Sunday, July 21, 1929

Dear loved ones:

Three weeks have passed since I wrote the last letter to you. . . . Currently so much is happening and so much is being said that by the time you get this letter another great storm has passed over us. The people here are very uneasy. May the Lord protect us against the worst. So much is happening which we would never have anticipated. . . .

If things continue as they are and [all the plans] are implemented there will be no living person here in spring. They will all have died from starvation. The grain is to be delivered as soon as possible. More is demanded than each individual will harvest. We are apparently supposed to live on air. What is all being demanded is hair raising, but people are getting used to it. What else can one expect if they want to know nothing of God and do everything themselves even though they are helpless. . . . And yet in such a time people still want to get married. Last week there was a

wedding in Tiege, an Agnes Loewen with a Wilhelm Unruh from Gnadenfeld. In the near future K. Janzen is marrying Mariechen the daughter of the painter Toews. Not long ago an Enns was married in Altona. . . .

Emigration is as distant a prospect as its ever been. If things remain as they are not even those who were sent their steamship tickets will leave. From what we have learned recently that seems almost certain. Gerhard Martens paid for a steamship ticket for his sister over a year ago and they are still here. . . .

I wonder if this letter will reach you or if the storm will destroy it. We're writing less but we have no choice. Paper is very scarce and anyway, we have nothing happy to report to you. . . .

Enough. Wishing you good health which God is also giving us. Warmest greetings to you from us all.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

9

Sunday, August 11, 1929

Dear loved ones:

With this [letter] we want to inform you that we are well and wish you the same. We received your last letter of July 14 on August 7. In other words we have received all your letters and everything in them. You too have received all our letters.

We are in the midst of harvest. If it had not rained so much recently we would have already finished threshing. We had to turn the oats twice before threshing. Now the grain has been lying for three days and cannot be cleaned because its too windy. If possible we want to finish threshing next week. Its not very much but even that is taken from us. God alone knows what will happen. They've been hauling grain to the collection point all Sunday, from morning to late. Anyone who has any concern left asks himself what we will eat throughout the year. . . .

There is hardly any fruit. We each ate one apple and a few pears, but they were tasteless. There were no apricots. The few plums were picked from the tree while they were still green. That's how things are here and soon the cold winter comes. . . We torment ourselves from morning until evening and at times work beyond our strength, yet nothing helps. What we have eaten until now is ours but beyond this -- well fretting doesn't help. One is

happy for a dreamless night, for life has become very bitter. Some time ago we got some syrup from the store in order to sweeten our lives a little. We can only imagine sugar. Enough of all this bitterness. . .

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

10

September 22, 1929

Dear loved ones:

With this letter we wish you health in body and soul. . . .

We have a very busy week behind us. It was a running and a rushing from morning until late. One was happy when evening came. We cleaned up our melon patch, first the watermelons, then the pumpkins. We put the vines in a pile. In the midst of this brother P. had to go to Halbstadt on Thursday and work for three days. We were not idle [during his absence]. We broke corn and I drove it home. You should have seen me. There is a great deal of laughter every time I drive alone. Procrastination was of no help, it was simply a must. I'll gladly do it if only the wagon remains whole. So far I've done quite a job and brought in seven loads. Agnes and I got clay and sand from the clay pit in order to fix up our room. The plaster has fallen down in one of the rooms and in spite of all the difficulties surrounding us we want to have our own house and keep nice rooms.

Two weeks ago we had the Harvest and Thanksgiving Festival in church. Alexander Ediger from Schoensee was the guest speaker. He preached a serious, moving sermon. He had selected 2 Kings 6:15-17 as his text, a beautiful and suitable text for this difficult time. Among other things he said that the words "Fear not" occur 365 times in the Bible. God wrote one for each day. When the people with all their cares do not know where to turn and almost despair, and praying seems futile then Elisha prayed: "Open his eyes that he may see. So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha". . . .

The schools have all begun. How happy are those families who have no children to send! Sunday is desecrated. The children have

to go to school on Sunday and have a holiday on Wednesday. . .
Enough. Wishing you and your son all the best.

As always I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

11

Sunday, October 22, 1929

Dear loved ones:

Four weeks have passed since I wrote the last letter to you and so I will try to fill the page once again. . . .

We have been very busy during the past weeks. We cooked watermelon syrup and made potato starch at Riedigers. . . We also got brush and wood from the forest. We took the axe and saw, a thing we did not have to do when we had brothers, yet because we have to do it, we manage. At times it takes all our strength, after all its not woman's work.

As I sit and write I can see various scenes through the window. The adults are going to church, the children to school and the Russians to the co-operative, which is always open on Sunday. There is mostly drinking there. This evening there is again a spectacle in the club house: music, a meeting, a dance and what is most important, a buffet. A lot of people will be coming together. Tickets are cheap, 15-20 kopecks, but its not worth leaving the house for such rubbish. Last week the school children went around to record everyone's age. The teacher follows what is prescribed. What and how he shall teach is outlined for each hour. Practical isn't it? Its almost as if he is completely childish and does not know what he is doing. That's the way everything is, for now even the farmer knows nothing. One the farmer receives a registered wheat mixed with rye. "My," said the miller who had never seen such mixed grain before, "what beautiful wheat!" The next day the wheat has to be returned, it was intended for someone else. The third day he again gets his wheat and on it goes until he has finally managed to seed. Many fear and believe that this was spring, not winter wheat. Privately bought wheat or rye cannot be seeded -- that is the law. The farmers do what is prescribed, for all argument is useless. We will see what the coming year will bring in the fields. Not long ago they had planted a large amount of grain. Then the agricultural expert finally came and determined it was

spring wheat. Well with all the raisins bopping about in their heads everything has to be brought to a standstill. Then there are the figures in the newspaper about reconstruction: what they are constructing and want to construct, what they want to take out of the ground in terms of coal, minerals and oil and who knows what else. The zeros on the numbers grow steadily larger. It is fortunate they can lie so well because they don't know how to write anything decent.

In school the children get one scribbler per month and no more. The children are writing on the blackboard with white earth. Most of the time they are playing outside, that's the fashion nowadays. . . .

Our rooms are fully furnished. We have a cupboard, a commode, a table, sewing machine and chairs. We lack nothing. We've acquired seven chickens for we simply couldn't do without them since eggs already cost 40 kopecks. So there are we five, the cow, seven chickens, a cat -- that makes 14 who want to eat something each day. One can eat a lot of rye bread before one is satisfied, at least I can. . . .

There is a lot I could write you about but I better not. Will close.

Wishing you all the best,

Your sister Susan

12

Moscow, November 10, 1929

Dear loved ones:

With this [letter] we want to report that we are currently in Moscow. We left home on November 2 for Melitopol and arrived towards evening. At noon on November 3 we climbed aboard the passenger train. We travelled in relative comfort until Alexandrovsk when the train became so full that we almost had to sit on top of each other. We arrived here on November 5 at 5 A.M. This big city life is not for us. We found accommodation outside the city and are paying 20 rubles per month for one room. You can imagine how full it is with 11 people and our things. P. has gotten a small stove, but during the first days we were very cold. We cook our food on a gas burner. Ten families live in this house, about 27 adults and 28 children. It's like a guest house with all the coming

and going. . . We will tell you what happened to us in the recent past when we can sit across from you. Many of our co-religionists are here. We don't know how long we will have to wait here. God grant that it might not be too long.

We are strangers in a strange land. There are two families from our village but they live a long way from us.

The weather here is dark and gloomy and the days are very short. The houses here are surrounded by evergreen and birch trees. It is a lovely region and the people are very decent. All of us are living such a gypsy life but we have the confidence that the Lord who brought us here will lead us to our destination. We brought some dried fruit and baked goods from home. For lunch we cook a fruit soup or a potato soup. . . .

Will close. Think of us. With warm greetings and best wishes to all of you from all of us.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

It is clear from Susan's letters that collectivization moved rather slowly in 1928 and that force is rarely used. Forced collectivization begins in the summer of 1929 and all forms of land tenure except the collective are forbidden. By 1930 Susan's village and four others have been forced to form a *sovkhoz*, a state owned agricultural enterprise in which the workers are simply wage earners. The letters reflect three characteristic features associated with the process. First, expulsions from the village usually associated with northern exile become more frequent. Sister Agnes writes that such unfortunates are taken to the Lichtenau station and loaded 45 to a freight car for transport north. The local rabble almost immediately loots the abandoned homes and farmyards. When some of the earlier exiles begin to return home later in the year they are imprisoned or again sent away. Letters arriving from the exile camp tell of many deaths. Secondly, forced collectivization is encountering severe resistance, both active and passive. Planning meetings degenerate into heated debates lasting far into the night. Women armed with hoes march to the *sovkhoz* offices demanding their rights. Men are standing about waiting for orders, taking no initiative and making no decisions on their own. Harvesting machinery stands idle, either for lack of parts or the will to make the necessary repairs. There is a third problem: tax and other assessments are still the order of the day. In February Susan reports that her village is to deliver 36,000 eggs and has been assessed 7,000 rubles, the latter payable in 14 days.

Much of Susan's concern in her 1930 letters focuses on survival. Early in the year barley bread, porridge and potatoes constitute the essentials in the family's diet; by mid- and late summer they live mostly on fresh vegetables. Father Jakob comments on the great shortage of flour and carefully notes the family's purchase of four pud of wheat. Susan's sisters duly note the prevailing shortages: there is no sugar, soap, lard or oil. The local co-op has only three items in stock: whiskey, salt and fish. Kerosene is in such short supply that the family retires at 8 p.m. in order to conserve the precious fuel. The strategy for winter survival involves sufficient flour and potatoes for the winter, a supply of hay, pumpkins and beets for the cow, straw and prepared manure for fuel. During the harvest day labor in the potato or corn fields for payment in kind also enlarges the family larder. In early winter knitting and sewing for others brings in cash or much needed foodstuffs like beef or chicken.

Thursday, January 9, 1930

Dear loved ones:

Since I again had the urge to write you a letter today I will do so. We wrote the last letter during the Christmas holidays a few days after our arrival here from Moscow. If you have received and read it please burn it for it only contained sad news. We had to send you some sign of life since you did not know where we were. I wrote the last letter after our departure on November 10. As much as I wanted to I could not give our address, for we lived in constant fear that something could happen to us on account of it. It was difficult not to hear from you for so long but there was nothing we could do. Now please write as soon as you receive letter no. 1. We are longing for a letter from you to learn how things are and whether you are well. Please don't burden yourselves on our account. It was meant to be this and no other way. We had to return and no one asked us if we wanted to, no we were forced [to go back]. We soon saw and heard what kind of free people we were and in what kind of a free land we lived. When we were finally sent back or better forcibly loaded, and after we had rode about in a cattle car for 9 days we finally arrived at our home sick and exhausted from it all. Now you know why I wrote you such a sad letter, but please forgive me I simply could not do otherwise.

Now we are at home again and have our warm room and our bread made from crushed grain used to feed pigs, which does not satisfy Agnes nor I. It probably has no nutrients. One eats, feels full but not satiated. I nevertheless still find it tasty. I could eat almost nothing on the journey. I constantly had fever and a bad cough. The fever vanished as soon as we were home and the cough has almost disappeared. Father is still coughing though it is easing up. Right now he is taking a nap. This morning sister Liese went to the other end of Tiege to stay with the children of brother P. He and his wife went to a child's funeral in Rosenort. In the afternoon sister Agnes went to Blumenort to visit the Baergs in order to pour out her heart and hear some news. P. Baerg's sister, Lene, is her intimate friend. Well she'll come home with a lot of news, but whether anything wise is questionable.

Franz Friesen firmly hopes and believes that because we have been in Moscow we will soon be able to leave or better said, extricated from abroad, because they have the names of all of those who were sent back. I don't believe this. If it were to happen things would have to change a lot. It would have been better if we

could have arrived there (in Canada) during the work season but since so many left in November we did as well. We did not want to blame ourselves later if they should all have left. Out your way it would certainly be easier to get women's work than men's work. When the Martens arrive at their brother G. Martens, then you can ask them many questions and they will tell you many things. Yesterday the A. Riedigers slaughtered their pig here at our place. It weighed about five pud. We have not as yet bought a cow. We want to wait and see what the future brings. The cow prices are currently between 200 and 300 rubles which is too high for us. We still have enough feed as well as fuel. All of it simply remained behind [during our absence]. . . .

Yesterday our brother-in-law Riediger received your letter from December 16. From it we learn that you are very concerned about us. Please relax and don't worry. Please understand that we simply must endure what is destined for us. We are thankful that we are all well and can work. The time of reunion will come for us as well even though they seek to keep us here by every means. Finally the Lord will say so far and no further. Oh the ridicule and mockery of these people in the newspapers is simply terrible. . . .

You will have read many things about our stay in Moscow in the newspapers. Our local ones also wrote much concerning it, but the opposite of what really happened. Once again dear brother don't let your heart be troubled. I know your character. It was so difficult for us to let you go, but now we are very happy that you left at that time. God has given you a dear wife and a son. I do not know Lena's character but I know she will cheer you up and help you bear the pain of our separation. The Lord can and will help us all, so let us not lose our faith in Him. We hope that this sad time will soon pass and many others share this hope with us. A hearty greeting from all of us.

In steadfast love,

Your sister Susan

Dear loved ones over there:

A month has passed since we wrote our last letter to you. It's terrible that it should take so long, please forgive us. But that's the

way it is in life: one lacks enthusiasm. Then of course there is the current life here which daily becomes worse. People are quarreling and bickering so that many are becoming enemies. It's little wonder. Previously each man was his own boss and now each will only go as far as he is pushed, but not a step further. Nowadays people do under duress what they previously did cheerfully. They have become so dependent that they have to be told when to plough and seed and how to do what where. Everyone knew what to do in the past but times have changed. Five villages in one collective is supposed to mean something but the people do not have, or are not allowed to have, any will of their own. They are constrained by force and if they resist they immediately come under threats which are so awful that they will rather give in and do what is demanded of them. This is the current situation. What is the absolute worst for us women is the fact that in fall a common kitchen is to be organized. Even if it comes to that, I don't think it will last long. Once they start with the women let them watch out. There could be some bloody heads! One thing is certain: the women will not be made fools of. Well, it will be some time yet.

The day before yesterday there were some real hot-heads among the men. There could have been a fight and little wonder. Ten tractors have been sent here with the stupid stipulation that our villages put them to work, pay four rubles per dessiatine and then feed the starved tractor drivers. In the adjoining village our people are to work with horses and ploughs free of charge, take along food from home and use seed grain from our villages as well. That was too much and our people refused. The others realized that if it came to a fight they would lose and so this time they relented. The men have to live through this kind of thing every day and because the illness is catching the whole family becomes so nervous that it is difficult to focus on anything else. The happiest people here are those who own no land. We now belong to those, for the situation was simply unbearable. We said we wanted to be rid of it as soon as we returned from Moscow but they refused. As time passed they became more insistent that we keep it, but we remained resolute. They almost broke down our doors and we almost exploded when we heard them at the door. Once when they were inside and observed our agitation and our firmness -- our eyes flashed like those of an aroused tiger -- they realized they could do nothing with us. We said that if they did not take it from us it would remain as it was because we wouldn't move a hand or a foot. They finally took it from us. We have already learned that the land cost us more than it brought in.

We live in a state of constant fear. Ten days ago three families

from our village were resettled, at least that is what they said. We say they were simply driven from house and home into the big, wide world. They worked all their life but for whom. Now the authorities satiate and luxuriate on these farms. Those who have been exiled are: our landlord, his wife and three little children, his two parents and her two parents with their son. They all left last Sunday. It was also a disconcerting time for us since they were guarded day and night and we lived on their yard. We had to witness everything. Well it's passed now but who knows what comes next. Everyone wonders what April 1 will bring since they have made so much of it.

Yes, well -- here is a bit of news that had the entire village chuckling and provided a good change. There was to be an engagement but no groom showed up. The widow K. Teichroeb was to be engaged to a certain Harder but no one knew from where. He could not look directly at people and usually had his hands over his eyes. She was so blind that she did not realize what kind of a man he was. Her 14 and 15 year old children said: "That man has a bad conscience, don't trust him." On the day of the engagement she managed to persuade him to go get a minister and gave him the coat and ring of her first husband. He never returned. All the neighbors and relatives had already gathered but no bridegroom. Some people say she is a bit weak in the head.

The seeding is finished, only the corn, sunflowers and melons still have to be collectively planted. We wish you a happy and blessed Easter. When do you celebrate Easter? We have Easter on April 20.

Your sister Susan,

Dear loved ones over there:

Since considerable time has passed since we sent the last letter to you I will write once again. Thank God we are all well. We received your letter of March 30 on April 21 and yesterday the one from April 15 with the picture also arrived. Thank you so much. Your son is big and healthy looking. Does he get chocolates every day? Marianne has also grown a great deal and is not thin, but is very small of limb. I go there every week. The dear thing stretched out her arms towards me and a smile covers her entire

face. She fell from her chair last week and bruised her nose. She now has a low wagon so that the other three can pull her. Peti was in a bad state for a while. They took him to the doctor and he diagnosed hemorrhoids. That's why they could do nothing with him. Now he is better. His whip is not even out of his hand when he sleeps.

You write that both of you have been working in greenhouses. We cannot imagine what they are like. We once saw a picture which Uncle Gerhard had sent to Muensterberg, but it had turned out so dark that we could not see much. No frost penetrates such houses. Our garden was so lovely then on the morning of April 29 we had 3° of frost. The beans which were already as tall as the breadth of a hand were finished. The potatoes and pumpkins which had sprouted were also done for. The mulberries and walnuts were also blackened.

We did various things during the past week. We hoed our vegetable garden, then I and Liese sew and knit, Agnes crocheted and Marie knit as well. It was all for strangers. In spite of the hard times people occasionally want to appear sheik. Then on May 1-2 we had two days of holiday, that is to say not we, but those who felt like reveling and those who were forced to celebrate. The streets were filled with red flags and various banners. Then at 9.30 a.m. the meetings began on the Tiege meadow. In the afternoon gifts were distributed in the High School for the students of the five villages: a bag with six candies and two cookies, the flour and sugar for which had been confiscated from those who had been expelled. In the evening there were various performances, dancing, and afterward an unparalleled drinking-bout. The last people went home at 5 a.m. They walked by here shouting loudly. After they had slept off their intoxication it was back to work. That proved very difficult.

Father, Liese and Marie are going to church, Agnes is reading and I'm writing. In the afternoon there is youth Bible study in the church. The church story has become very muddled. There are the Thielmanns who were married in fall. She is Catholic. Then there is Peter Baerg's brother who was simply registered with his bride-to-be, Erna V., and only because her parents were exiled. She can now stay at home with her grandmother. All this at a time when they are going to baptismal instruction. Then there is the chap from Blumenort who was in the Russian military service and had an arm shot off in the fall. He also attends instruction with his bride while they already have a one year old child. The first pair belongs to our church, the other two to the Lichtenau Church. The ministers who allow this get a lot of criticism. They say it is easy to talk. We live in different times and to excommunicate them

is easier said than done. We should be happy they still wish to come to church. Yes it is a big responsibility. It's simply awful how little the baptism candidates know. Recent Tiel. was supposed to recite "For God so loved the world . . ." and what do you think, he did not know a single word of it. The minister had to prompt him word for word. When one hears this it is sad, so very sad.

Then there is also another frequent happening: seven families have already been exiled from our village. Such sad letters arrive from the north: bread, only bread. The products which they took with them were taken away. Those here who had to go to Neudorf lived in earthen holes and almost perished from the bedbugs, lice and fleas. And here the buildings stand empty. Oh how humanity heaps one sin on top of the other and there is no end to it. Rumor has it there will be more exiles in the near future. Who will be next? During the last few years we have experienced what man can and must endure, and it steadily becomes worse. God sends everything gradually, otherwise people could not bear it. Will the Lord reject us forever. No, oh no, when His time is come, His hand will be stretched forth over the evil ones. The word which Moses spoke to the children of Israel in Exodus 14:13ff will always be precious to me. That is our prayer and petition. If one can occasionally have a good cry things are easier to bear.

Well enough, the page is full. Have you received our letter with the picture. We are a bit concerned about it. Maybe we should only send one every leap year. Please let us know. Your dear father is well. Greet the parents from all of us, and also Miss Martens. We also wish you dear one all the best.

In love,

Your sister Susan

You dear ones over there:

Since Liese has already written before lunch, I'll try to add something. In the morning I told her she should write for a change and she actually did. You'd better note that on your calendar!

Today the articles of faith were read in church. It was done so quickly that one could hardly follow the ideas. Little wonder for

brother J. did the reading. He is the leader of the church. Some 11 souls are to be baptized and join our church: 2 young men, a couple and 7 young people.

Today is a cool, windy day. It rained and hailed a bit yesterday. The garden is doing very well. The potatoes and peas are already in bloom and the cucumbers already have runners. In the collective's garden the beets are full of weeds. Three boys have been hoeing for a day, but most of the time they are lying behind the hedge. That's just the way things are here. Just who are we working for, ourselves?

Sister Liese just arrived with Irene. She is a daily visitor but what can you do if the aunties have spoiled the child and she cries if mother does not allow something. Liese is such a great baby sitter. Father plays a good deal with her as well, but does not always have the time.

A robber band was taken into custody last Sunday. S. carried his head very high, after all he had an important position. All the exiles will remember him well. Since thieving during the day did not bring in enough he also pursued this profession during the night. Naturally he had plenty of helpers. They finally caught him and he has been in prison for a week. Now he is demanding that the village sign a petition affirming his innocence. What a ??? They stole at three places successively: butter, eggs, cream, oil, syrup, lard, bread, a centrifuge and finally chickens.

There are daily meetings of the collective here. People certainly are not in love with each other. Each day people think it will collapse. Several times a week there is an uproar which lasts until morning breaks, and after that they are to drive to the steppe [to work]. Yes you should see the faces. On Sunday many go to the co-operative and the children go to school. This goes on week after week and one goes crazy if one does not exercise a bit of reason and understanding. It's a miracle they don't demand we turn our houses upside down. I think the majority of people no longer know what they are doing: they only want to eat and drink. Those who do the work are supposed to live from air and still do hard labor. Three weeks ago I went to Melitopol with sister Anna and R. in order to shop. . . . I bought dresses but they were so very short -- all above the knees -- that I had to buy five. One has to at least be decently dressed for people. In the city it is very evident that everything is going downhill. Everything is sinking to the swamp and yet they boast how they are progressing, catching up and surpassing the pre-war years. What do you think? Do you believe it?

Johann Nachtigall from some Russian village moved to H. Unruhs two weeks ago. The children are completely russified. The

daughter, aged 19, had never been in a German church before she came here. Schellenberg's kin, the Johann Duecks want to move in with Riedigers next week.

The collective has five binders standing on the yard waiting for repair, but there are no parts. The men at least have a place where they can sit and talk and smoke. What a shabby mess! One group is sitting with the bees, the teacher and the students are with the silk worms but know absolutely nothing about them. Since the mulberry leaves froze they are feeding them elm leaves. What a joke! What a mixed up bunch! They say they have about 10,000 of them but many are starving because they don't know how to handle them. The children have to gather the leaves throughout the village so they run through the gardens and tear off whatever comes into their hands or is suitable for their own mouth.

You will be wondering -- doesn't she know anything better to write? No -- honestly and truly. We live in a world where the leaders are insane. It is fortunate that the people are so forgetful. The doctor claims it's the barley bread. Many don't want to believe this but it must be the truth. Well, enough of all this silliness.

So you burned your face! How the information shocked us, my breath stopped when I read it -- how terrible. We got the letter on the morning of May 19, in other words in 14 days. Please be careful. It would have been horrible if you lost your eyesight.

Johann Haak is again at work and Jakob is again the big chief when it comes to doing something stupid. Why is he not ashamed? His cousin Johann E. has become very quiet since he was disenfranchised last year.

Well what else shall I write? Next Sunday is Pentecost and on the second festive day there is a baptism here in our church. Be well. We wish you all the best. Please remember that you are living for others. Think of your loved ones.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

You dear ones over there:

With this letter we wish your health in body and soul. Today is Sunday. Father and the sisters went to church. I am alone at

home. Currently we have very warm weather. Yesterday it was 27° and we still baked bread in our indoor oven. What do you think of that? It's of no consequence if you and we laugh about it. The main thing is that there was still something to bake which is not the case in many homes. And the heat -- well we simply open the windows and doors in the evening and it's soon dissipated. Our house is cool inside because it is surrounded by trees. Recently it has rained quite often, but only lightly. The next day the dust flies again. We live almost entirely from vegetables: we eat fresh potatoes, peas, carrots, and have canned 28 cucumbers. We have even cooked green beans once. The vegetable garden is excellent but the grain on the steppe leaves much to be desired. At places they are already cutting [the grain]. Here we will probably begin next week. The hybrid winter wheat has grown very high and there will be much straw. There are varying opinions about the corn: some say it is very good and others say that it is shrivelled and damaged by the hail so that much of it has lodged. The spring wheat is not higher than half an *arschin*. Only half of the barley has headed, or as we say in Low German *geschosst*.

Who knows what we will eat in winter since the winter wheat, according to the papers, is to be hauled directly from the [threshing] machine to the station. Humans and animals will probably starve. Beggars are constantly at the door and there is a great deal of thievery, especially of potatoes. Everyone simply wants to live and even if he has provisions he would rather steal, for then his supply will last a bit longer. Fourteen days ago we separated honey. The collective members received one pound per person, but they all say the honey is bitter. A week ago two beehives were stolen during the night. No effort has been made to retrieve them. It would be of no use anyway. The thief of whom I wrote a short while ago was imprisoned in Halbstadt for one week, then came home. He is not even ashamed but one can immediately detect that the man has a bad conscience.

I'm in the dark as to what will happen here during the cutting and threshing period. Here on the yard there are six binders and four grain cleaners, provided they are all repaired. Many parts are missing and there are none on hand. Then too the canvases are all torn. Then there is all the disunity, quarrelling and strife. Yesterday the women almost resorted to violence. With their hoes they walked the length of the village to the collective office. What a fuss there was! It would only have needed one blow and they would have scattered them (the bureaucrats), but they were not quite courageous enough. Who knows what will happen tomorrow. They all say they are not going to work until their wishes are fulfilled. They want to travel to the seaside for a few days but the

authorities won't allow it. Well the women have to begin somewhere. Whether they will win is questionable. There are too few of them.

The first group of silk worms have spun their cocoons. The five pud of cocoons have already been sold at 30 rubles per pud. The second group is now being fed but many are dying.

Many of the exiles which were sent to the high north have returned home. Many scattered enroute for they sensed what would happen to them at home and they were right. Our former neighbor M. returned 14 days ago together with his large family. The next day they came to get Mr. M. and his two oldest sons. One had disappeared. They were sent to Melitopol the following day. Mr. M. is sick in the hospital but tomorrow they are to be sent to the north. This includes all men who have returned. Where the men are missing they take the women, even those with nursing infants. The two Miss Isaaks from the neighboring village also returned. One of them has become mentally ill. They wanted to take her again as well, but thanks to much discussion and the fact that she was subject to attacks, they left her at home. The other one, however, has been imprisoned and is to be sent back. The returnees tell horrible stories about how they have been treated. Many went mad. Oh what a terrible world we live in and each day it gets worse. Is there no salvation for us? Will we have to die here? It certainly appears so for after the harvest the exiles are to begin again. Everyone is asking "where can we go?" Those living in Neuhoof cannot even come here to visit. This reflects the daily conversation here. You can imagine how the people are quarreling and how exasperated they are. What they do or have to do is done with such unhappiness and anger in their hearts. It had to come to this: that people could no longer live together in peace. Thank God that for those who cling to Him there will be no suffering or sorrow over there, as there is here in this evil, wicked, world where people plan evil and think up lies.

Mrs. Teichroeb has once again become engaged, this time with a Neufeld from Blumstein, a widower with two small children. His wife died here in the hospital at Easter. She simply wants a man, even if it's one made of straw, at least that is what the people say. She rejects her two step children, who could already help her and in exchange takes on two little ones. Where the two will go I don't know. The wedding is to take place in the near future.

You ask about the name of the village where G. Riediger is the teacher. It is called Friedensburg and was established two years ago. It is a Volhynian village situated beyond Rosenort. Then the fifth village, for which our village had to seed in spring, is called Reinfeld and is a new village located on Blumstein land, which

borders on ours. The settlers are from Blumstein and Altenau. Not long ago when we came from the city I counted ten houses. They settled about half a verst from the great roadway. Gerhard R. is here for summer vacation at his brother Abraham. He says it's too noisy at his parents and he wants to study during the summer. I don't think that's the case because such a teacher is a bit afraid that his lovely, lily-white hands could get dirty. Who knows how high he will rise in his position. . . .

Sister Agnes has a steady hunger for strawberries. There will be very little fruit this year. We have many pear trees in the garden but not a single pear is to be seen. There are quite a few apples in some places, but most of them have been torn off. Some areas have many cherries but they have been badly damaged by the hail. Our pear tree has a few pears but if we will get to taste them is doubtful for in our yard things are comparable to an pigeon killing (i.e. there is much activity and confusion). The sisters are still knitting woolen socks and are ready for winter. Marie knits for strangers. We got two abandoned ducklings from sister Anna who also want their daily food. We feed them boiled porridge and cottage cheese. We're still eating barley porridge with milk and vegetables. Now and then we have perogies.

Well now you know a great deal, but nothing really intelligent. I will stop. I wish you all the best. A warm greeting to all.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan.

You loved ones over there:

We received your letter of June 26 (no. 11) on July 18 and the one from July 24 (no. 13) on August 18. One letter has been lost. We were uneasy that no letters were coming. An entire month without news from you.

You are very busy. . . We are too but not in the same fashion as you. That's just the way it is here. One tries to survive as best one can and if it means gleaning. Agnes and I go gleaning whenever we can with a sack on our shoulder and a pail in our hand. It's not everyone's thing but both of us do it. After all our chicks and two ducks want something to eat. Our cluck hatched 15

chicks yesterday. It is a bit late but we couldn't get a cluck since everything is so out of control here. If you were to spend a day here and see everything that is going on you would only think of one thing: are we in a mental asylum? It is simply indescribable. It is such bedlam that people sometimes confront each other with forks, clubs or whips, almost as if they are ready to beat or soundly thrash one another. And the swearing and curse words which come from their lips. Then when they return to the family from threshing everything is so tipsy-turvy. The head of such a household is constantly preoccupied with the idea: how can I support my family, everything is being taken from us. Oh, if only people could see where things are heading. And yet a Gerhard R. will say to his father: "In two years things will be better." Who knows how many more stupidities there will be? Anyone who has open eyes and ears can observe how far man in is delusion will go -- but who has them? The growing young people know nothing better and no longer learn anything substantial. And if someone wants to learn something decent the question arises: where is there a place which can make a useful member [of society] out of a person? It does not exist, at least not here. . . .

Your last letter contained a postcard and a newspaper clipping. Many thanks. From it we perceive that there are people over there who still have ideas. Mind you they have the money for it. Here the farmer must first carefully save [his money] in order to carry out stupid ideas. Well we're living in the midst of it all and sometimes it seems it's impossible to go on. Yet we're finding it is possible. Though things are ever so dark and gloomy we have the hope and assurance that there is Someone above all of this and only allows what is His will. And when one is in deep despair a small ray of hope appears and quickens the sad and weary heart. If only people had a bit more love towards one another and tried to better themselves His help would not be long in coming. . . .

There is to be a harvest and thanksgiving festival here on Sunday, September 7. The ministers who have been invited are Mr. Klassen, Halbstadt, Janzen from Neukrich and P. Nickel. The sisters just returned from church and say the singing will soon cease: the throat and tongue are so dry and the sacred land does not possess sugar and oil. Enough for this time. Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, September 21, 1930

You loved ones over there:

Since four weeks have passed I want to write to you again. We received your letter of July 24 on August 18 and the one from August 26 on September 15. We did not receive your letter of August 16 where you described where you wanted to travel. Well it doesn't surprise me -- such shabbiness is the order of the day. Things here are in a hopeless state of confusion. If this continues for two more years no stone will be unturned, there will be no clothes to wear and nothing to eat. Each day things here are going further downhill. One day it will probably stop by itself.

For a time we have had cool weather with a great deal of wind. We've had a busy week of work behind us: we cooked syrup, made potato starch, dug the potatoes and did various other things -- wherever people needed us. We manage to earn a bit with this, though not like you over there. There are also four bags of torn socks which await our attention when all four of us are home again. Then the knitting needles will be whirling in competition. We get eggs in exchange for this work. Next week we want to clean and wash. Then we will have finished most things. We have enough bread, potatoes and heating material for the winter. We earned two loads of straw digging potatoes. We also got several loads of straw simply for cleaning it up at the threshing site. We didn't wait to be told twice. We, Agnes and I, dragged it to our place and father built the straw stack. Who can do it better than he? We don't have to freeze and it looks like we won't starve. We are thankful for what we have though it is not as abundant as in the past. . . .

There is much talk here that help is on the way. If it's not true then many will be driven from house and home even before winter. In the recent past people here have had many house visitations both by day and night. Then they take what they wish. The people are so frightened when they arrive in the village, as again happened today. It is not enough to work six days a week. Early today all men were called to haul wheat to the station. They are not asked whether they wish to or not. Poor humanity -- can they still hope and wish for something better? They have sunk so deep into their sins. Will there be a deliverance?

We currently live in a time that is difficult to describe. Everything is collapsing. Formerly if someone had told us what would happen no one would have believed it. . . .

A warm greeting from us all,

Your sister Susan

Tuesday, October 14, 1930

Dear loved ones:

Yesterday we received your letter of September 21 and a card on Friday, October 10. I want to answer immediately. . .

We live in a difficult time here. It is always: give, give and if one does not want to, force is used. We are lucky because we have no land, but we do not escape unscathed. Not everything has been brought in from the field. All the potatoes have not yet been dug. This is the women's job. The men are busy making silage . . . They use corn straw, pumpkins and beets. Whether the cattle will eat this is another question. They are ploughing and seeding with horses since the tractors cannot do everything. They are currently ploughing in Muensterberg. Sister Liese is still at the Riedigers. Since Grete has eczema on her hands she goes there to milk, bake bread, wash and patch. Sister Liese is tired of doing this and little wonder. It is such a difficult situation if the wife gets no help from a husband who, as you know, is only concerned with his public roles outside of the home. The oldest four children are going to school since it is compulsory for all children under 16 years of age. Many parents are not happy about this.

A boarding school has been organized on Derksen's farm where students from elsewhere can get room and board. The boys live here and the girls at the Girls School in Tiege. They all eat together here. What an arrangement! Each month the parents have to send provisions: flour, oil, chickens, milk, cream and other necessities. If you could drop in on us you would not know what to think or say. We have gotten so used to this that we don't know what it means to be otherwise. In their opinion things are getting better each day. The matter of clothing and shoes is likewise critical. All the old shoes in the village are to be collected and fixed, but with what is another question. We are still working outside. We are gathering brush from the forest. Father chops it up. We are still knitting. The four bags have all been returned. In exchange we get eggs, oil or occasionally a rooster. We can always use these things. We have always had work to do and will continue to do so. There are always people who can't knit or don't want to. They don't even like to sew. Well we enjoy it and do well at it.

Eggs here cost 2 rubles [for ten], butter 5 rubles, oil 6 rubles. Meat is simply out of the question. We have already killed our ducks and our chicks are almost mature. Thus we live from one year to the next and things don't get better, in fact quite the

opposite. . . .

The school is divided into seven classes. There are five male and two female teachers. The eighth class consists of the beginners who take their lessons in the Tiege Girls School and are taught by Mrs. Dick, the doctor. For now they have everything they need, but come the long winter they will freeze, for there is no coal.

Today we made sauerkraut and cleaned out the attic, where we will store our chaff. Agnes walked to Tiege, Maria is patching, Liese is killing flies, and father is reading. We have enough provisions and heating materials for the winter. Tomorrow we want to get our chaff from Tiege and then we are all ready for the winter. We will then be able to let our minds wander freely which will certainly be good for us. Three weeks from now it is one year since we left for Moscow. We do not want to think of it. It was such a sad time. Brother P. related that he had heard what happened to brother K. last fall. Like us, he wanted to travel abroad with a larger group. They arrested him and put him in prison. He is now free and back at work. He has not written since March and we do not know where he is. Hopefully we will soon have a letter from him.

With warm greetings to all,

Your sister Susan

9

Wednesday, October 29, 1930

Dear loved ones:

We received your last letter of October 2 on October 25 together with three sheets of paper, a map and a newspaper clipping. Thank you for making the effort to write. . . You ask if you should send us something. Please don't. We still have what you sent us and are keeping it for an emergency. We are afraid they will take it away when they come and search through everything. This is happening frequently and when they find something valuable they take it with them. Well some day this will end. So please, don't do it. Many thanks for your love and kindness, but it is better for us this way. When we are in need, you'll be the first we turn to. At sister Grete's neighbor to the left, they have searched through and recorded everything twice. It will probably all be sold in the near future. There is so much going on here that one becomes

afraid and fearful and often asks: "How long can it go on?" The people are being tormented and troubled and still there is no end.

Today we have rainy weather. Father, Liese and Agnes are at sister Anna's, where they are helping with the butchering of a pig. Butchering is done so quietly here that not even the neighbor notices it. A number have already done it this way, that's just the way it is. . . .

Here people are driving to the city almost every day. Everyone can buy as much sugar as they like at 2 rubles, 40 kopecks per kilo. All want sugar in order to fill the stomach with something sweet. Our cow aborted which is too bad, but she gives ample milk. Our chicks have grown considerably. We have flour, a bit of porridge, fuel, chaff for the cow, feed for the chicks -- so dear heart what more do you need? Each day there is less kerosene. Members of the collective get about two kilo per month. The lamps do not burn long in the evening. We still have some and will have for a while. We go to bed when the clock strikes 8 p.m., that's a long night until 6 a.m.

Two themes dominate Susan's letters during this year: forced collectivization and famine. Though collectivization had already begun in the summer of 1929 there is a new radicalism and ruthlessness in 1931. Undesirables are placed under house arrest and allowed only a few hours to pack before being taken directly to the railway station under armed guard. As in the past capricious money and product assessments are still the order of the day. Church buildings and the few remaining ministers are especially targeted. All horses, cattle and poultry become the property of the collective. The family's cow is taken away from them in October. In early November Peter's wife reports that they still possess two chickens, one rooster, one rabbit and one cat. The collective is forced to deliver all produce directly to the state. Father Jakob repeatedly expresses his astonishment at the piles of grain, fruit, pumpkins and watermelons that are dumped at the train station and left to rot. The villagers are not even allowed to keep grain for seed, nor can any grain be fed to the cattle and horses. Ironically the grain and fruit harvest is well above average.

In March Liese wrote to Gerhard: "We have only one illness here -- starvation". Brother Peter is kept busy conducting funerals. Many, including some famine victims in the Senior Citizen's Home, are buried without "song or ceremony." There is a dramatic rise in food prices as the famine intensifies. In Melitopol flour sells at 70 rubles per pud. Butter costs 5 rubles a pound while ten eggs sell for 3 rubles. Dry goods can only be purchased in the local store if the customer is willing to sell produce in return. Susan's family manages rather well thanks to the productivity of the garden and the money and occasional parcels which arrive from abroad. In the struggle for survival one institution becomes increasingly significant -- the *Torgsin* stores. These stores, located in the towns and larger villages, only accept payment in gold, silver, precious stones or foreign currency. In order to obtain food the last family valuables are sacrificed or, as in the case of Susan's family, foreign bank drafts are exchanged for a few kilograms of flour or lard.

There are still periodic references to Peter's activity as a minister in the local church. At times he appears to be the last link of continuity in a dying religious tradition. In a brief letter of November 9, he reports that he alone is serving all the villages between Lichtenau and Ohrloff. There are many marriages and many funerals. The state is especially sensitive about church weddings and many of these have to be performed secretly. Peter

notes that Christians are under tremendous pressure and that many Mennonites have given up their faith. The churches are becoming empty since many people have been exiled and the young are being politically indoctrinated in the schools. His own position is increasingly perilous. "Formerly it was an honor to practice my profession. Now it is a shameful pursuit which one makes fun of and ridicules".

1

Thursday, January 1, 1931

Dear loved ones:

With this letter I want to wish you God's blessing and good health for the coming year. . . .

Now let me answer some of your questions. First, our former neighbors: the entire family is torn apart. He and two of his sons, the eldest and the third, are in the far north; the second son is wandering about somewhere in the world seeking to earn what he can. His wife lives in Memrik with the youngest four children: one daughter is working in the vicinity; one of the eldest left for M. in fall with her employer, who is a German engineer; the third is here in our village with her uncle Abram Dick. They fled here 11 months ago and since then have been living in the front part of the house at Johann Haaks, . . . Dick's oldest daughter who is married to a Frenchman moved to Sestagun in the fall where he works in a winepress. The other Dick children are here with their parents. There are two sons, one of whom has a Russian wife, a daughter, and another daughter who is studying medicine in H. . .

Now the latest news from here: all the young men have been drafted again. They had to leave December 15. Your age group had fulfilled its service so they could stay. Four had to leave from our village: David H.; his brother Hans; Peter Friesen and H. Goerzen. More were scheduled to leave, but those who took the rifle were not needed. As usual it was only those who were religious. They were sent to the Don Basin where they are to do various kinds of work. They are to serve there until the spring of 1932 when the Five Year Plan ends.

Today there was again a funeral in the Senior Citizens Home. A woman aged 76 was buried. It is the eighth death since we are living here. More come all the time so that the number almost remains the same. There are some 52 inhabitants counting the house parents. Reimers live in the kitchen on the yard. I also

wanted to tell you not to send any parcels. Several people have received them, but H. Unruhs for example had to pay as much [duty] for the sugar as it costs here and slightly less for the rice. . . . The teacher Janzens received a package of clothes from his parents and what do you think he was supposed to pay for it -- 296 rubles. How terrible! They could not raise that much money so they took and sent it back. So please don't [send anything] we can't accept it and you suffer the loss. People here sent packages to their loved ones in the far north but they were all returned. Yet those who are there suffer terribly from cold and hunger. Eyewitnesses who were recently there say it is horrible.

We have somewhat eased off on our knitting. It was very busy before Christmas. One person wanted socks, another gloves, the third a doll -- all a few days before Christmas. Ten days before Christmas I made a lined coat for Lieschen. There was also a feverish interest in dolls. What one has, the other wants. The children received many gifts: Lieschen and Leni each got a doll, scribbler, apron. Lieschen also got a dress and six crayons which she wanted so badly. The lad got a [play] horse, then I also stuffed a rabbit and a duck. Brother P. made wheels for them and they were overjoyed. Marianne also got a dress. . . .

How I would like to come for a visit and chat with you. When will that be possible. I've already waited four years. Well we hope our waiting will soon come to an end. We have already learned patience. Sometimes it's bearable but when longing overcomes us it is difficult. We often ask "why?" Enough. Best wishes and a sweet kiss for little Gerhard.

I remain in love,

Your Susan

. . . We received your letter of January 4, which was sent on January 8, on January 29. It contained four sheets and a newspaper clipping. . . .

Currently we are living in a very sad and difficult time. People are going mad. They simply can't handle it any more and everything becomes confused in their head. This happened to someone in Mr. Wiens' village. His wife and child are in Germany because

they managed to cross the border in 1929. He was in prison and could not leave. He then tried everything but could not get out. They then tormented him and his parents. In their estimation they possessed too much. They took everything even some of the clothes they were wearing.

Terrible things have happened in the village during the last 14 days. At 11 homes they have taken virtually everything. They left Mr. Wiens, who lies paralyzed in bed, one pair of old trousers. All [their] provisions were taken. They not only took everything from his son N., but arrested the lad as well. His wife and three children only have what they are wearing. They have no food and good friends are bringing them each meal. It is so sad and it's still winter. They even listed their heating materials. Here in our village the neighbors of sister Grete in our direction were also expelled and disappeared to who knows where. The house stands empty. Across the street at H.E. they are tearing down the barn. They have been working at it for one week, but have not accomplished much to date. If it continues at this pace it will take a long time, until it's leveled. The owner (Heinrich Enns) has vanished. He felt fire under his feet. Similarly brother P. disappeared 14 days ago today. He is currently with brother K. He has the promise of a lot of work once the weather becomes warmer. In the cold weather they are only breaking up stones.

Sister Liese is still here with her children. I spent a week there, now she is here for a week. She does not want to be alone.

Here we have only one minister who belongs to our church, W. Janz. B. from Muensterberg has also left. Many of brother P.'s fellow ministers have vanished. They of course are under the most pressure. They want to close the churches. They are not ordering it, but they levy high tax on the ministers which they cannot pay. If this continues we will soon be as sheep without a shepherd. How long will this continue? Our former neighbor died in northern exile, far from his loved ones, on January 9. They sent him many [parcels], even the relatives helped with money and products, but he received nothing. He probably starved. They found him dead in the morning. Both of his sons, as was recently learned, are in another location and doing well.

By March the last cow is to be collectivized as well as the last chickens and pigs. When that is done the common kitchen is to open. All the provisions which people still possess are to be brought together. Even clothing and laundry is to be collectivized. Yes that will be a glorious life! How smart it will look when a larger person puts on the clothes of a smaller one, or a thin person those of a fat one, though there are not too many of these left. My advice would be to cut off all the women's hair.

Our village is to deliver 3,000 eggs this month, 4,000 the next. Unfortunately the chickens are not alive as yet. There is not enough feed. Soon, so it is being said, the farms of the two Koops and W.N. will be demolished. . . Then they are also planning to tear down all the houses in our four villages and build four large dormitories: one for the married men; one for the married ladies; one for the youth of both sexes; the fourth for children of both sexes. This is part of the Five Year Plan which by us they want to finish in three years. Isn't that wonderful? These and similar concerns are the subjects of daily conversation here. There is much else which our minds cannot comprehend and understand and yours certainly not. You in the loneliness of your forest will sense nothing of all of this. We are in the very midst of it. It sometimes seems as if we're sitting in a desert and the wind blows our eyes full of sand so that we can see nothing but darkness all around us. The dining hall is no longer operational, there are no provisions left. The boarding school is fading away, the provisions which the children bring from home usually don't last the month. . . At doctor Dicks and at the minister Penner who lives near the church sons were born on the same day. Doctor Dirks is not happy: it was supposed to be a girl. . . .

Enough. With a warm greeting from us all.

With best wishes,

Your sister Susan

3

Sunday, February 12, 1931

You loved ones over there:

. . .Yesterday two men from the Senior Citizens Home were buried without song or ceremony. One was an older man, the other middle aged. They had been starving severely and were both swollen. Beggars constitute a problem which becomes worse every day. The situation is desperate and becomes steadily worse. Oh what have the people brought upon themselves and there is no end in sight. When will this wickedness finally come to an end? When they come to the door the beggars only ask for a beet or a bit of warm soup. Oh this chasing and running from one place to another!

A week ago four families were driven into a single house. First

a woman with eight children; sister Grete with her five; Mrs. W. with seven; then N., both with 3; in all a total of 27 souls. Most of the beds, laundry and provisions were taken away. Then they scornfully haul everything away and ridicule these poorest of the poor. When I saw this the words came to mind "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord". The houses are now empty, everyone can enter them. The doors are open day and night. In the case of sister Anna's house someone simply lifted out the door and took it away, but nobody pays any attention. If any animal dies, be it a calf, pig or horse, the people swarm over it like animals of prey -- if only they can get something to eat. I'm told of a Russian village where entire families are lying dead in their homes and nobody buries them. They starved. What will happen by summer?

The sisters have gone to church, father is sleeping, and I am writing, but the ink is terrible. Father's memory is slipping. He has to get up frequently at night and cannot find his way back to bed, even if it is close by. When he converses, which is not frequent, it's not cohesive. He has a good appetite and we give him as much as he wants. Many women drop by our house and chatter incessantly. He misunderstands what is being said and afterwards it is almost impossible to clarify things for him. Well chatting is something which our sex will not give up. We simply don't tell him everything, he just doesn't understand. . . .

The postman just brought a card from Torgsin. We have 20 rubles and 48 kopecks credit. I will probably go along with P. and the entire party. Thank you so much. You don't know how good it feels and how much you help us. . . .

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

4

Sunday, March 5, 1931

You loved ones over there:

Three weeks have passed since our last letter and so I want to write again. . . .

Though there is less frost than last year our fuel supplies are dwindling. Most heat their stoves with what they can find in the barn, silos or attic, or even the odd bit of fence. Similarly we

collect what we can for our stomach. The children of family W. near the village school beg throughout the day. If they can't get something they steal. Not even the cats are safe from them. When they get something they eat it all at once. There must be nothing edible about when they arrive. Their father, who has free lodgings, encourages them in this. He lists the families to whom they should go on a card. Many people are very upset about this. We know them from earlier times. If the man knew who had money he immediately wanted to borrow but he never repaid. Then too the entire family is overgrown with lice.

Currently the Health Commission is at work. They work as follows. The family Giesbrecht is first. They and all their belongings are loaded up. Since the beds were so torn the feathers were dumped into a barrel and away they went. The people are taken to W. W.'s farm. There they are put into a bath, their hair cut, their clothing and other possessions taken to the hospital and disinfected. During the time they have to run around naked. Then a commission was supposed to clean the house of vermin and dirt but it did not work. They were forced to go and began to work but then said that Mrs. Giesbrecht could clean up her own dirt. Well that's the situation. The place is in a horrible mess and they will soon be full of vermin again. The Johann Enns family is next in line. Things are no better there. They have simply given themselves to indifference. The lady walks about in her best clothes like a mudlark and thinks she is something. She is well and has many children, but apparently they don't play. They sit near the store and have little vitality. Its related first to the uncleanness, secondly to the diet.

Here in the barn the women were supposed to clean the chaff. They made a few turns [of the cleaning mill] but could not continue. They lacked the strength. It was very cold and snowy so they protested and were sent home. They did not have to clean anymore. In one day they had done about 4 pounds. That was really worthwhile, wasn't it? Now the cows are being trained for the harness. There are meetings every night but with no results. Someone said that if it were not so sad one could die laughing. But there they sit, their heads lowered and show their agreement by simply shrugging their shoulders.

Many people are dying here. As a result of the famine typhus has broken out. Peter has had up to three funerals a week. He cannot always get there because they don't come to get him, and on account of the deep snow he can't walk. Last Sunday the Heinrich Neumanns from Muensterberg were buried. They lived in a Russian village and died mostly as a result of the famine. In one month when it gets a little warmer things will be much worse.

Everything is on the decline. How many beggars come each day. Yesterday there was one here who said he had been walking for three days and had not been able to buy a single beet. Oh how thankful they are for the smallest gift. One can see that they have seen better days and are now homeless. In all this cold they wander about in the world. How many of them will fall asleep in route and slip into eternity where all this suffering ends? But what faces the living?

A pass system is supposed to be introduced here and many are fearful. There are many refugees here and if they have no papers they will be sent back to where they came from. They cannot get work without the documents. Herman Neufeld is also here in the village. He wants papers but can't get any. They've told him: "You escaped without papers. Now you're on your own". The family is still in the Crimea but he said they will probably send them back to where they came from.

Several days ago sister-in-law Liese got a letter from her brother in the north. He reported that they were on the move and would soon be sent even further north. Last week Peter went to the Torgsin in Melitopol in order to shop for himself and his uncle Johann, who lives with them. He said there had been very many people there. He had also met the Fasts from the upper villages who had come to claim the body of their dead father. There had been 20 bodies in the morgue, all dead as a result of the famine. How sad! Yet it continues day after day, week after week. No one is safe. I'm told that if one has a grave dug for a loved one it is usually filled by the time the body arrives. That's city life. . . .

Enough. We extend our warm greetings and wish you the best of health.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

5

Sunday, March 22, 1931

You loved ones far away:

Wishing you good health which thank God we also enjoy. To date we have received all your letters.

In the last letter you write that you want to send us something -- sugar, rice, cocoa or money. We're happy you're thinking of us.

At present we are not suffering but if you want to send something please send only rice. Several people have already gotten some and when they clear it through customs they only have to pay 3 rubles 90 kopecks. For sugar one has to pay much more per kilo than here in the store. I'm sure that's true of cocoa as well. The long trip to get the parcel, the duty -- you understand what I'm saying. . . . If you send us rice that would be extra special, even if there is no sugar. . . . In any case it will take 7 or 8 weeks to get here. Things have gotten much worse here in the last 6 weeks so who knows what the situation will be like then. We cannot foresee the future but it looks dark and foreboding. Please don't send any money. They pay it in our currency and there is nothing to buy except liquor, chicory and buttons. It is depressing to come into the store and see only bottles.

Our people have degenerated and there is considerable drinking. There are many here who do not have more flour than the widow in Elijah's time. They have no potatoes in their cellar and yet they have to eat. Then they have large, young families. If things continue the way they are people will be falling like flies in the next few weeks. We certainly believe that God can do wonders, but there are already so many desperate and despairing people thanks to the difficulties they have experienced.

During the past week a number of people have again been imprisoned, about three men from each of our villages and between 20 and 40 from the Russian villages. They are all in Halbstadt where the cellars are full. The food has to be sent from home. Some wives gave their husbands the last piece of bread. There are some that are better off and surely they will share. Well I don't want to burden your hearts with this anymore. We know from your letters how you sympathize with us. We are not yet starving and can still eat our fill. . . .

A warm greeting from your loving Susan

You loved ones over there:

With this we wish you good health in body and soul which, thank God, we also enjoy. We received your letter of February 19 on March 12. You are again working in the greenhouse and on the fields. In short you have plenty of work. There is also enough

work to do here but it seems that in God's great earth there is not a little patch where we can plant our garden. We can do little. Even though we do not belong to the Artel they want to force us to work, but we won't go. With our [restricted] diet we don't have the strength to hoe day after day. There are terribly many weeds in the garden and on the fields and now we weak women who have such a poor diet and have lived on the generosity of those abroad, are to hoe them. This angers them the most, for they think whoever does not join their organization will starve to death, but our great God above knows ways and means to preserve us. All their activity and striving is sin and the devil's work. One sees injustice everywhere. We've never had such a situation. The village is now filled with thieves and rabble. Who knows where it will all end. If the exiled and the resettled return it will be a real mess. . . It will take ten years before the land is as fertile as formerly.

They said there was to be no intelligentsia and so they were chased out. Now they are supposed to come back in order to get things on track. They can do nothing with this rabble. Wherever possible they steal and take what they want. It's quite the life here. If I should tell you everything that is going on, 20 pages would not be enough. They have all their prescriptions and laws, but they are only on paper. In reality everyone only thinks about what's good for him and how he can get more. When one thinks of former times one occasionally clasps ones head and thinks it's a terrible dream, but it is reality. Will there be better days for us here upon this earth? Many are still hoping and sometimes it appears so, but it does not seem likely.

People have become so godless. The men don't need the church anymore. Things are going downhill towards their objective, but no one thinks about what the final objective will be. One becomes tired and worn out from all the adversities, yet the battle intensifies. Yet thank God He gives daily strength to endure and suffer. It is sometimes so difficult that one thinks everything will collapse.

We still don't have a garden plot, but we don't want to complain. If God wants us to stay alive, He will provide the means. During the last days I have again and again thought of the word: ". . .they neither sow nor reap. . . but your heavenly Father feeds them." This in spite of all the wiles and ways they seek to starve us. . . .

Best wishes and warm greetings from us all.

In love,

Your sister Susan

Monday, April 13, 1931

You dear ones over there:

With this letter I would like to report that we are all well, thank God, and wish you the same. . . .

Things are sad enough here. Many have just enough to eat in order to survive. Many are suffering from malnutrition and are swollen. The harvest is a long time away and the gardens haven't been planted yet. It is still cold and wet with snow showers. Seeding was supposed to begin on March 15. They had decided it was to be done at a fast tempo. Everything was to be seeded in 10 days. These plans were soon dashed. One day it rained, the next it snowed and so it has continued until today. Luckily they can't control the weather. Now we can celebrate Easter in peace and quiet.

We sent you letters to your former address on March 1 and March 22. Did you receive them? We had sealed them well. Were you frustrated when you tried to open them? We did it because the envelopes here are of such poor quality.

Today we celebrated the second day of Easter according to our old custom. Yesterday brother Peter preached first, then Mr. Penner. The choir led by E. Sudermann sang. The singers were from both of our villages. Brother P. has been home for one month and continues to preach as he always has. We don't know for how long. We have two ministers: brother P. and W.J. In the neighboring village there are also two: Mr. P. and E. Sudermann. In Lichtenau there is no one. They are alternating in Lichtenau. Youth instruction and evening services are held once in one village, then the other. This means they are on the road a good deal.

Brother Kornelius has been here for a week. He came on business for his Artel. He wanted to buy watermelon and beet seed. He is travelling through all the villages but has difficulty finding what he is looking for. He had been a shoemaker during the winter and now in summer worked in the garden. They are better off than we. He said he could not believe that the people were starving here, but now he had seen it with his own eyes. There is already a kitchen and a bakery for those who have nothing. . . .

It is difficult to buy anything because nothing is available -- no money and no products. Now and then porridge arrives but the lineups are so long that most get nothing. A saucer full of porridge costs a ruble, a pail of potatoes 4 rubles, a cup of beans 80 kopecks -- but even this will cease. We have survived one

famine and are in the midst of a second. How will it end this time? And it happens here where bread was so plentiful. The people heap one sin on top of the other until all has been destroyed. . . .

Here things are being demolished in one place and reconstructed in another so that everything is in turmoil. They do the same with cattle. One day they are in this barn, the next day in that until all the barns are dirty and the men don't know what to do. A few days ago Mariechen said that each of the men has a screw loose in his head. . . .

The people here have become indifferent and it is little wonder. They have been pressured from all sides and don't know which way to turn. They allow themselves to be pushed around. Because they are so blind as to what is going on around them they are heading for destruction and yet think they are doing wonderful things.

I must close. Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

8

April 14, 1931

. . . In our last letter we told you what you could send us, that is if you want to be so kind. Please send only rice. We have to pay as much for sugar and cocoa as it costs here. Sugar is not available now but one can get along without it. A lack of flour would be much more serious. A number of people have gotten rice. For 10 pounds they had to pay 3 rubles, 20 kopecks in the post office. . . .

Once we can plant vegetables and start eating them we will save on bread. We want to plant a lot and I have enough seed from last year. We also want to plant as many potatoes as possible. The population is already starving severely, even in the villages. . . .

Your Susan

Sunday, May 10, 1931

You loved ones over there:

Wishing you the best of health in body and soul which, thank God, we also enjoy. . . The trees are in full bloom and we could get a lot of fruit. . . There is endless work but when it comes to eating those who do no work fare the best. . . Next week we want to spread our old manure pile, an old man and three women. . . Its always a question of whether our strength lasts. The piece of bread does not become larger, but quite the opposite. If there is no more [bread], and many don't have any, what will happen? . . .

People here have to endure so much. Their heads are overwhelmed with problems. Again and again the questions: What will we eat? What will we drink? With what shall we clothe ourselves? . . . The crisis here is great and daily intensifies. We want to give it over to our heavenly Father. If it's His will that we survive He will give us what we need.

During the past week there were many night visits here in our villages. At some homes they took the last flour, butter and oil, at others jackets, coats, clothing and undergarments.

The family which formerly lived on the middle street near the meadow and moved to the new village, this family of 11 has nothing more to eat and the boys visit as many chicken pens as possible. If people want to keep their eggs during this time everything has to be under lock and key. Our chickens have been very diligent during the last week so that we had eggs now and then.

Father has already chopped a lot of brush and we have already sawn and chopped wood for the winter. We're also knitting on the side. . . In the near future I want to make a dress out of the large apron which mother once bought. I think it will work, it has to work! It doesn't matter how it will turn out. Then I want to dye it [a dark color] for it is too light. We're running out of soap and so our wash is soon going to be gray. Even if it is sad you're laughing and so am I. I think that as long as a person has some joy and does not hang his head and can occasionally laugh all is not lost. As long as God is in control lets keep our head high. . . He will not allow more to happen than is His will. . .

Father and the sisters have gone to church and I am alone at home. In three weeks it's Pentecost -- who knows what will happen by then? The ministers have had to pay a lot recently. Our brother had to pay 100 rubles. You wonder where he got it? He said to me: "We have to live the life of faith. Like George

Mueller I believe and have never been let down. The money has always been there when it was needed". . . .

Your Easter letter, written on March 27, was the last word we had from you. . . Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your Susan

10

June 7, 1931

You loved ones in a distant land:

We are all well thank God and wish the same for you. . . We received your last letter of May 10 on May 30. You thought our package might arrive by the 25th, but nothing has come until now. It may have stopped in route for the entire land is hungry and cries from bread.

Forgive me if my writing is confused. The way things are here one hardly has the courage to write. During the last 14 days there have been money confiscations and it still hasn't stopped. Many don't even have a handful of flour. They have to travel to the bazaar in city to buy flour and grain in order to make the [forced] deliveries. Entire wagons filled with furniture are being taken, but the prices are low and flour costs up to 60 rubles per pud. We had to give some [grain] as well, even though we had not harvested anything. . . The old man who looked after the church was taken to prison in Melitopol on Wednesday because he could not pay. In Neuendorf all the men were taken and only the women and children left behind. Three old gentlemen had to bring them their food. It is very sad for they don't even get enough water to drink. We have to deliver milk whether we want to or not. They assess so many kilos per month whether the cow produces that much or not. All the separated milk has to be given every fifth day and we're not paid for it. We are to live without lard or bread -- in a word -- on air. Then eggs all have to be delivered to the incubator. . . .

There are 10 million silk worms in these few villages. The school children have to pick a kilo of leaves each day and even the old women who can't work in the fields have to help. They now want to drive to the forest to get leaves. . . .

We have a lot to do gathering fuel and cattle feed for the

winter, looking after our garden and knitting. . . .

There was no baptism or Pentecost because there was no elder. If the church approves sister Liese's husband will baptize the candidates this Sunday. . . The sisters just returned from church and said that the song leader had to close all the windows in the church because the teacher in the school could not bear to hear spiritual songs. . . .

I remain in love,

Your Susan

11

Saturday, July 4, 1931

You loved ones over there:

Considerable time has passed since we wrote you the last letter and so I want to write today and not wait until tomorrow. . . On July 3 we received the notification of the parcel and this morning we picked it up. It contained 11 pounds of rice and 9 pounds of lard. We had to pay 16 rubles, 45 kopecks duty. We are so very, very happy that a parcel has finally come to us. Thank you dear ones for your gift. It will taste wonderful. It was sent on June 17 and is here already. The other two are still in route -- it would be so sad if they were lost. . . .

Much has happened here since I last wrote to you. . . On the forenoon of June 21 we had baptism here in our church. There was communion afternoon at 2 P.M. At 4 P.M. there was a funeral. Since no elder could come brother Peter had a very busy day. Fifteen young men and 26 young ladies from both churches were baptized here in our church. . . On the same day mother's life-long friend, the widow J. Tiessen was buried in Altonau. W. Janzen held the funeral sermon. . . .

During the night of Saturday-Sunday sister Anna's three sons which were still at home were arrested as well as the brother of our sister-in-law Liese. They were taken to Halbstadt. Around 4 P.M. on Monday they came to sister Anna and chased everyone present out of the house. . . they had to leave immediately and the door was locked behind them. Sister Anna and the children were given half an hour to get ready. You can imagine the panic. They ran here and there and put things in sacks, for nothing else was allowed. You can imagine the confusion in packing. We did what

we could for her. We went to the garden and picked cucumbers, dug potatoes, collected onions and kohlrabi and washed them because it was muddy. The neighbors brought bread or roasted buns or eggs. Everything was given through the window for those inside were prisoners. Two men stood guard. We came to the window which she opened now and then only to have it slammed down. The people here have become stubborn and are not easily intimidated. We had to say goodbye to them through the window. At J's they were in the middle of washing and had to put the wet wash, whether blue or white, into the sack. . . Well at least they could pack and take what they needed because in the end it took two hours. Finally the wagons, accompanied by armed riders, drove on the yard. The door was opened and the loading began. A lot of people gathered on the yard and the street. They tried to disperse them, but as I said the people have become brazen and express their own will. The possessions were loaded on one wagon, the sister with her two daughters and son on the other and away they went. At J's there were even more people for his three sisters were there as well. The youngest daughter of 8 months had cried the whole day because no one had time to look after her. When they left she was sitting on her mother's lap still crying. One asks oneself: is there no mercy in this world? The men were not even allowed to come home. They were taken directly from Halbstadt to the Waldheim station where they met their families.

Though sister Anna is normally easily excitable, she was calm and resigned. She had been harassed for so long that she was almost happy that this had finally come to pass. They were expelled on Monday and we still do not have any word where they are. Some say they are to go to Siberia or the Urals.

At times it is almost impossible to bear. Last week they levied a 200 ruble tax on us. Since we can't pay it by July 10 who knows what will happen. We are completely in their power and yet we're not. No more will happen than He allows. I and sister Liese have been looking after the church for two months. It's been very busy lately because it has been decorated for various festivities. We are still spinning in our free time. Agnes spins and Mariechen cooks for us. . . .

The ministers have again been assessed. Our brother is to pay 200 rubles. . . We still have bread. We have been rationing it for breakfast and supper for the past three months. We eat no bread at lunch. It's simply not in vogue when there is so little of it, at least that is what we tell ourselves. We always eat potatoes and vegetables: peas, carrots, kohlrabi, green beans. Then there are the mulberry hedges where we stand and eat, each in our turn.

There is something special we want to request of you. We

mentioned it in our last letter if you have received it. We have heard that it is possible to request the emigration of parents and immediate family members from abroad. If this is true could you fulfill this our wish. We know you will if you can. . .

Think of us in your prayers. We need them badly.

In love,

Your sister Susan

12

Thursday, July 15, 1931

You loved ones over there:

Wishing you the best of health in body and soul which we thank God, also enjoy. . .

In our last letter we asked you a big favor. If you can help us, [please] do it as quickly as possible. You can't imagine the confusion we find ourselves in here. A family from Lichtenau was requested by their parents which are over there and they did not even have to go to Moscow. . . .

Oh how humanity is suffering here day after day. Will there be no end to it? Will we all have to perish here? These are questions asked by a fearful heart when everything around us is so dark and gloomy. But no, the old God is still alive and will allow no more evil than He wills -- as long as we remain faithful.

Sometimes we think everything is at a point of collapse. There are such large demands for money. The day before yesterday they wanted meat. By August 1 we are to deliver 6 pud meat. Where are we supposed to get it? We may have to kill our cow. As of today each cow owner is to deliver 4 kilos of milk. Our cow does not give that much milk. . . .

While I am writing this the women are going back to work, picking the fruit and bringing it to the center where it is divided according to families or better according to each working member of the family. The process creates a lot of hot heads, it's fortunate the men all have shaven heads. . . .

Our thoughts are always with you. Our anxious hearts ask: "When will our separation come to an end?" Will we ever see you again on this earth? . . .

I want to add something. Agnes just returned from the post office with 24 rubles. If you sent it many thanks; but please don't

do it again until we request it. We have to pay so much that neither you nor we can collect it. If we pay what is assessed there is soon a demand for another payment. That's the situation here. . . .

In this letter there are four pages and three newspaper clippings.

Susan

13

Sunday, August 2, 1931

You loved ones over there:

With this letter I want to wish you the best of health in body and soul which, praise and thank God, we also enjoy. We received your letter of July 5 on July 26 and read that your dear father has gone home. Who could wish him anything better in this difficult, tumultuous time, where so many do not know what to do. . . .

Since we have had rain for several days no one is working and a Sunday mood prevails. People begin to relax a bit. They were supposed to work day and night with no interruptions. One asks oneself: "Do people then have superhuman powers? Is not the night intended for rest?" But no one asks whether you can or can't, you must. When man realizes that all struggle and opposition is of no avail then he mechanically does what he is bidden, without contradiction and without asking why or for what. You go as far as they push you, not further. You should see the sad faces, they show such pain.

There is much fruit here this year. In many areas the cherries were plentiful. When they were barely red they were torn off with stems and taken to the station where the drying factory is. Apples, pears and apricots do not fare much better. They are left about for a few days. Then, poorly packed, they are finally transported and are tossed on a large pile where they rot. . . . The fruit trees will not last long at this rate, the weeds are up to the branches. . . . We help pick up fruit for various people and are paid in kind. We collect everything we can so that we can fill our stomachs. We have already gathered our potatoes, onions and corn. . . .

Sister Anna has written a sad letter. How will it all end?

Greetings,

Sister Susan

Sunday, August 16, 1931

You loved ones over there:

Fourteen days have passed since our last letter and so we want to sent you another sign of life. . . .

Have you received all our letters? Until now we've got all of yours. Last week we received two money orders, one for 17 rubles, the other for 30 rubles. . . .

The public kitchen is still in operation, but only about 30 people are using it -- the shepherds, the garden watchmen and those with no home. The members of the Artel get one pound of flour per day for every child and adult, while every worker gets 2 pounds. The division of flour, both white and whole wheat, is made every Thursday. And what about us you ask? Well we eat our daily bread too, though it's not as large as theirs, but it's enough and we are thankful. Grain is abundant this year and we haven't had such beautiful large wheat kernels for many years. Wheat sells for 1⁵⁰-1⁶⁰. Much of it is taken directly from the threshing machine and piled on the ground because the granaries are full. Much of it has spoiled already. . . .

We are already eating bread from the new wheat. There are still good people who care about their fellowman. We managed to buy grain for ourselves. The Lord has helped us until now and He will continue to help if we only trust Him. Enough. We wish you all the best. . . .

In love,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, September 6, 1931

You loved ones over there:

Three weeks have passed since our last letter and so I want to write again. We see from your letter of August 6, which arrived on August 27, that you are well and have a lot to do. We too have as much work as we want to do. We're helping people cook watermelon syrup. I have helped at six places but it's exhausting work. . . . If we're not working elsewhere we go gleaning or spin,

knit or sew. We're never without work. I was recently asked if we make any money knitting. I quickly replied: "Even if we don't make very much at least we don't sit around doing nothing." The person said nothing. For her knitting is almost shameful while I enjoy nothing more -- whether it's stockings, caps, jackets -- it's all the same to me as long as I don't have to be idle. . . .

We're still eating as many watermelons as we like. They turned out very well this year and are very sweet. The Artel has already harvested its onions in Bartel's barn. They had planted them in the gardens of those who were expelled. They brought them in by the wagon load. . . . Today the sunflowers were to be brought in. . . . Even our collective leaders have appeared and are doing physical work. . . . Our chairman is standing on the top of the wagon load. It certainly won't hurt him to sweat a bit. He is also the teacher in our seven grade school. He wants to be important and make innovations but he had little respect among our people, which he realizes. Our village is particularly stubborn. They are the officials for our five villages, then each village also has its separate head. Our head is our former neighbor across the street. He is the right man for the job and is not easily intimidated. . . .

Last week 1,000 chicks arrived which are kept in the former home of our neighbor. I went to look at them a few days ago. Things were not as they should be. Already 300 had died. Then 40 pigs also arrived last week. They are as thin as greyhounds. It will take a long time before they are fattened. . . . The cows are being collected on sister A.'s [former] yard. It looks so desolate. The weeds in the garden reach the branches of the trees, the machine shed was torn down by the Russian neighbor last week. . . .

In October the Five Year Plan is to be completed in 3 years. Well they have a way to go yet and we are anxious and afraid. We must be consoled, the Lord will not allow anything to happen which we can't bear. . . . Wishing you all the best. With warmest greetings from all of us.

I remain.

Your sister Susan

Sunday, October 4, 1931

You loved ones over there:

. . . Until now we have received all your letters and you have received ours. People here complain that most of their letters are lost. . . .

Here they are again speaking of [expulsion] and exile and the people are afraid. The letters from Siberia report that the old people and children will be returning. But what will happen to them when they can't return to their home village? Most of these people are going to where brother K. lives. They say the houses, pig pens and barns are overflowing with refugees. They can manage in summer, but what of the winter?

On the farm across the street from sister Grete only the house remains. Sister Anna's farm is supposed to be completely demolished. Things have never been in such disarray, but no one thinks of cleaning up. For whom they ask. . . .

[Brother Peter] and his colleague have to work in Halbstadt throughout the week, where a race track is being built. He is a carpenter. He comes home on Sunday and then has to serve in the church. There were funerals on two consecutive Sundays; this Sunday as well as the next there is a wedding. You probably can't believe that amid all this people are still falling in love. I think most of them don't know what they are doing. . . . You can see how busy he is, and then there is all the work at home. We help where we can. . . .

We still want to cook syrup for ourselves and get the beets and greens from the garden and the pumpkins from the field. . . then we want to put the manure bricks [for fuel] in the barn and put the straw in a pile. . . .

They are constantly threatening us about our payments and want to confiscate our cow. It will probably happen in the near future. We live in a time where we simply have to accept such things. Well not all things -- one becomes stubborn and obstinate with time. . . .

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

You loved ones over there:

With this letter I want to report that we are all well thank God, and we wish you the same. We received your letter of October 25-26 and see that you are well and currently working with your potatoes. . . Compared with ours your potatoes are cheap. Figure it out for yourself. The Artel in the neighboring village harvested many potatoes. Because they only had a few workers they hired us to help dig them out. Such a hard worker gets 1.5 pounds of bread per day and 2 rubles a day if it's a man, 1.5 rubles if it's a woman. For every pud of potatoes which the Artel has to deliver they get the ridiculous price of 32 kopecks. It is strictly forbidden to sell to anyone but the state. If anyone needs potatoes he has to buy them at the market. And what do you think he has to pay? The large and small together cost 6 rubles, the better ones cost 9 rubles a pud. You can see how many days one has to work to get one pud. Wheat costs 12-18 rubles a pud. . . .

Everything has to be delivered to the state. Many loads of wheat daily pass through the Molotschna villages. Near to the railway station many silos, granaries, and houses are filled with grain since the transport is very slow. Yet locally everything has to go at a fast tempo. Corn is shelled late at night in order to be delivered early in the morning. This of course includes only the best cobs. The rejects are used to feed the horses and pigs. . . .

Some 16 tractor drivers were here for 3 weeks, ploughing and seeding and eating in the common kitchen. Now they are in the neighboring village. Today 30 students from the surrounding village are to arrive here in order to learn about livestock care. The farmers have apparently become so stupid that they don't know anything anymore. So a youngster takes a three or four week course and when he comes home he knows everything and wants to run the village. Yet he is still wet behind the ears. The world is so tipsyturvey! Everyone is a world reformer and yet they make it steadily worse. Most of them are absolutely blind and do not realize we are headed for destruction. One does not know whether to laugh or cry about all the stupidities which are committed. . . Most feel they are being treated unfairly and with injustice. Jealousy is rampant. The one thinks the other gets more. In a word it is very difficult to satisfy everyone. There is constant fighting and strife. And then we get guests who search through everything. . . .

It is very sad that the chiropractor in Lichtfelde is no longer

working. For the past one and a half years we had a woman here in Lichtfelde who used to work for him. She helped many here. . . Two weeks ago the woman with her husband and children moved to Turkestan. One moves here, one moves there, the third is exiled. They find no rest. Once they begin to wander they continue to wander, for they are chased from one place to another.

Our people have simply arrived at a threshold and when they are uprooted their fate is sealed. The people have completely given up their own will. Most of them work on Sunday. There are mostly women in the church. In the neighboring village the church will soon be taken from the congregation because they cannot pay the tax. Their minister Penner already left in September and now they want to worship together with us. There is reason to rejoice when people band together in this way. After all there is only one God to whom we cling ever more resolutely in this last turbulent time. The apostasy is great and people are saying the time is nigh when one will not be able to buy or sell without the mark [of the beast]. Blessed is he who will cling to his Lord and Savior even if it means suffering and sorrow. . . .

Liese and I installed the double windows in the church today. The men are not available. Except for a few coals from last year there is no heating material. Both churches want to collect some wood for heating. . . .

We always have a warm room since we have enough heating material. We get straw from the collective straw pile. We got a *Faden* of manure fuel from our cow. We also got some wood in the spring and collect whatever we can. We do not have to freeze. . . .

We still have a lot of work. Agnes spins, Mariechen is making warm shoes for herself, Liese is knitting and I am crocheting a cap or head net like women wore in earlier times. I've already made eight of them from wool or cotton. . . .

The day before yesterday a delegation from Germany passed through. They wanted to see the German villages and determine the level of reconstruction. If they had good eyes and ears they would have observed a lot. If one of you were ever to drive through here you would faint. No one was allowed to speak with them. . . .

The Artel harvested 265 wagon loads of pumpkins. They are piled up against the straw stack and are covered with straw, because there is no room inside. They are to deliver 200 pud of seeds to the state. There are also to be additional meat and potato deliveries, 700 pud of the latter even though collectively they did not plant any. . . They will have to buy at high prices and deliver, even if they have to spend all they have. . . The men run to and

fro on the street and don't know what to do. There is always the pressure of compulsion. When will the bonds finally be broken? . . .

Wishing you all the best. Warmest greetings from us all.

In love,

Your sister Susan

18

Sunday, December 7, 1931

You loved ones over there:

Since it's Sunday and our writing day I want to chat with you again. . . We received your last letter of November 2 on December 1. So far all your letters have arrived. . . We enjoyed the picture where your boy is sitting on a log. . . a happy child who has not yet experienced the storms of life, which threaten to engulf us.

Each day things get worse. Life here defies description. We sometimes think this is as far as things can go, but then they go even further. Now we wonder what Christmas will bring. Both sides are making plans. On our side we want to celebrate it like we have always have. The other side is making every effort to destroy what we've become accustomed to. Its often amazing how people persist in their old ways even if they have generally given up because they are usually repressed. . .

Terrible things have happened here in the recent past. Many are sitting in empty rooms. The furniture has all been taken away. Only enough food for a month has been left behind. How does a person look into the future under such circumstances. Winter is here and there is nothing left to harvest. If one does not look above for help one despairs. It is so dark around us. . . The evil forces do what they wish and take what they desire. It is terrible to meet such scornful faces on the street. One has to be quiet and give them what they want and not become [inwardly] agitated. . .

Last year at this time we were in Moscow. How terribly we were misled and had to return. We came back at Christmas time. I can't bear to think of it. You were so sympathetic. It was obviously to be this and no other way. The Lord knew what He was doing even if we don't understand. . .

Wishing you all the best. Warmest greetings.

In love,

Your sister Susan

P.S. Since the others do not want to write I will add a few things. They finished threshing here yesterday but there is still a lot to do. The sunflowers, corn and watermelons are still in the fields. . . .

Please don't be surprised if we send more cards from now on. There is no paper available. The schoolchildren have each got one scribbler in which they write and do arithmetic. The parents are to supply the rest of the paper. . . They have been getting out old slates and using them. . . .

We will probably be sitting in the dark this winter. There is no kerosene and lamp cylinders are not available. Well we're used to that. At least we won't be starving or freezing. . . .

19

Saturday, December 26, 1931

You loved ones over there:

I must write again since three weeks have passed since I last wrote. . . We received your Christmas letter with the Christmas card and your picture on December 22. . . .

On Sunday, December 20, the Old Age Home celebrated its 25th jubilee. A good many people, mostly women, showed up. The minister was J. Eckert from Lindenau, who belongs to the Brethren Church. Two maids at the Home as well as the head nurse presented poems. There are still three people living who were there when the Home was founded. . . During the past month they have an administrator of the new sort. He is a man from our midst and generally they get along with him and are happy with him. . . .

The street is usually filled with students taking courses. They live in sister Anna's house. Their course is held in the village school while their meals are eaten in the Tiege school. There are about 30 men and a few women, mostly Russians, who are taking a course on cattle breeding. . . .

W.M.'s barn and silo were demolished a few days ago in order

to get fuel for the hospital. They did the same in the neighboring village in order to get fuel for the Deaf Mute School. In Rosenart it was the same for the seven class technical school. This is how we do reconstruction.

Brother K. wants us all to come where he is, but we want to stay here as long as possible. We're always busy and not lacking in work. . . . Agnes told me yesterday that my hair was completely gray. Well I know that and it's gray for good reasons. I'm beginning to feel old. Next month I'm 40. We know what has been, and what is to come we'll leave with the Lord. He will do what He thinks best as long as we cling to Him. Though we are living in the valley of tribulation, we experience many a precious hour and are the recipients of many a kindness, especially now at Christmas. . . .

With warmest greetings,

Your Susan

The famine continues unabated throughout 1932. Thanks to parcels and bank drafts from abroad the family manages to survive in what Susan describes as a "paradise without bread". Except for their loved ones abroad they would not have survived. Again and again Susan travels to the *Torgsin* in Melitopol in order to exchange foreign currency for food supplies. Within the village there are still grain requisitions and house searches. There is widespread fear and anxiety and Susan believes the family is in danger of being expelled from the house. Even the collective has run out of grain and flour. Many of their cattle are dying. Marichen reports that if flour is available it costs over 100 rubles per pud. Agnes has gone to Memrik where the food crisis is less severe. Her parcels are welcome additions to the family larder in the Molotschna.

Monday, January 11, 1932

Dear loved ones over there:

With this letter we wish you the best of health in body and soul which we also, thank God, enjoy. We are busy all day long. Today Liese was at our sister-in-law Liese, whose husband returned home on December 30 after five weeks in prison. It was a long time and he said it exhausted him more than if he rushed about all day. It was difficult to endure: first all the swearing and cursing and even worse the interrogation which can hardly be imagined.

We had to return what you sent us. My was I boiling inside when I had to give back [the parcel]. He (the official) saw the anger in my eyes and did not make light of the matter. Well it's done now. When I think how hard you worked and now these people take it with complete indifference. I tell you it's almost unbearable. Here they are only thinking of export, everything has to go. Meanwhile the papers proclaim reconstruction and progress, how they are catching up and surprising the foreign lands. They are right in one thing: no people are as patient and submissive as ours, for they do what they want with us. They report how the people give of their own free will. If someone cared to ask us they would get quite a different picture. They almost break down our doors and its always: "Give money or else!" Well we seemed to be

over the worst of it. At first one becomes rather agitated and does not feel like eating or working, but eventually one calms down. The people were to pay some 200 rubles but we don't know what will come of it. I think there will be some bloodied heads for it is impossible to tolerate this mob any longer. They are all insane and act like ravaging wolves. . . .

Much is changing here. Both doctors are to leave. The Dirks are to go to the Don Basin and Schmidt to Waldheim. We are to get two newly graduated doctors. The size of our hospital is to be reduced. Its difficult to understand what kind of a new plan this is. There will probably be no more operations.

Everyone here is taking courses. Some 60 persons are taking a course on the dairy business, the others on cattle breeding, medicine, and still others on vegetable growing, pig-breeding, the raising of silk worms, gardening and what not all. The yearlings and calves are dying here. There are veterinarians but they know nothing. The Unruh's barn is filled with cattle and the doors are closed from the outside for night. Yet by morning the cattle have scattered to the four winds and the search begins. This goes on day after day. That's a model farm for you. . . .

The Giesbrecht who worked for G. Dueck lived in W.N.'s auxiliary house. He has been ill for a month, possibly with consumption. When he walked on the street one thought one saw a gypsy for [his clothes] were all ragged and torn. The seven of them live in one room, the youngest is four months of age. There are also 19 rabbits. Its an incredible mess but the mother refused to do a thing and is extremely slow. The health authorities came and tried to rectify things. They have almost nothing to wear. . . .

As I write M. and Liese are reading alternately, so please forgive if everything does not make sense in the letter. . . .

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

You loved ones over there:

. . . Yesterday was a very happy day for us. On February 2 we

received notification that a parcel from Berlin had arrived. I could hardly sleep that night. Next day I went to pick it up and did not have to pay any duty. I couldn't get home fast enough. Then we unpacked it. Was that ever fun! There was a lot in it: five meters of velvet; two hand towels; rice; oatmeal; sugar; pudding powder and six cans of sardines. We three simply stood and looked and admired. Then I turned around and burst out laughing. Mariechen was sitting by the sugar bag and tasting. It was so important to her to have something to sweeten her life. Thank you dear loved ones for all the good you do for us. After we calmed down a bit we made lunch and sat down to eat. We were barely seated when the mail person came and brought us notification of another parcel. I rushed off and was back in less than half an hour. Agnes had sent it. It was almost too much of a good thing.

We love the velvet. Cousin Maria thought that such clothes do not fit these times. I said it was alright for us to be a cut above the others. She thinks we don't deserve it. . . .

The doctors can stay here after all. Dr. Schmidt had to go to Muntau where barracks are being built for communicable diseases. These new sort of people are so afraid of death, it is to be avoided at all costs. They do not seem to realize that good health also depends on good nourishment and adequate clothing, both of which are missing here. In the next few days we are to be inoculated against small pox for the third time since the vaccine was not effective in the first two attempts. . . .

Our experience with our meat supply is similar to that of the widow with her vessel of oil: there is always some left. We can always cook our soup with meat and some of your lard, rice and potatoes. It has a wonderful taste. Sometimes we even allow ourselves rice with sugar. . . .

Here everything continues unchanged. Everything is done mechanically and without enthusiasm. It is all a matter of compulsion. Quickly and surely we are moving towards the abyss. We are already sitting in the mire and screaming but we don't wish to acknowledge it. The end will be terrible. May God protect us. Will close. Again our thanks for everything. Wishing you good health.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

P.S. Kindly send a fashion page or two. Please write more often.

Sunday, February 21, 1932

You loved ones over there:

Today is Sunday and a beautiful day. It is snowing outside and there is about 2° of frost. We received your letter of January 17 on February 7 and the one from January 28 on February 19. . . .

Not too long ago they said that no one here was to have more than one set of clothes. Now they say everyone can have four or even more as long as they earn it. Whoever does not want to work gets nothing. Things have always been that way and will still be that way after a 100 years -- at least that's what they say in the local soviet.

Then there is the teacher Radestock, a foreigner, who is also one of those who amounted to nothing in his homeland. In the summer he went about without a cap, in short pants and a short sleeved shirt, and with glasses -- what a dandy! The children do not respect him. He is now telling the children that in the Second Five Year Plan there will be so many manufactured goods in this land that they will gird the earth three times. Everyone says he doesn't believe it himself which is naturally true. There is no more paper to buy. The students each get two scribblers and when they are full, the writing stops. So when we send the last bit of paper to you, you'll have to send us some white sheets. Between us that will be a while. Father and Mariechen have made sure that it will last.

Our brother-in-law Riediger is in Muntau taking a course. His son Abram is now working in Halbstadt as a secretary. He no longer wanted to work here. He was home a few days ago (his family is here until spring) and told us that in the Ukraine no railway station will be heated. It is not necessary because it is a warm region, even though a few days ago we had 24° of frost. That's how stupid people are here. The children are also freezing in school. While in school they are forced to remove their overcoats, yet the teacher sits with coat and gloves on. The children do not behave. When they feel like it they shout at the teacher or throw paper at him. When they are supposed to stay after school, they simply go home. Well its not surprising since they are teaching that parents should allow their children free will. Its producing a generation that will step on them and with whom they can do nothing.

We still have plenty to do. Liese is making warm slippers for her brother as soon as he is able to walk. I am making warm shoes for the neighbor lady and knitting bright red cotton socks for the

neighboring children. . . .

We still have bread and if they will allow us to keep the flour which we still have it should last a while. We have potatoes as well as what you sent us, then also fruit and beans. We divide it up so that it lasts and are quite used to doing this. The pressures of everyday, which are routine and in vogue by now, matter little. We sleep well. . . .

Do you think a better time will ever come for us or not? If things elsewhere are as bad as here, then the end is near and our suffering will intensify, but He who hears the cries of his children will not forsake us and will rescue us from the cauldron of pain before we perish. . .

Please greet all the relatives. Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

4

Tuesday, March 1, 1932

You loved ones over there:

Wishing you good health which, thank God, we also enjoy. Today is a cold day, 11° of frost. Its been a cold February. . .

Today I went to saw wood. . . how many are without food or fuel. We are still in our home, for how long we don't know. We daily wait to see if they will take everything or throw us out, which has already happened to many. We are prepared for anything. Nothing more will happen to us than God allows. He has helped us until now. He will continue to help. Sometimes one thinks its a comedy, after all they only want to frighten us. In some instances this is the case. In other instances its very serious.

Here everything is currently out of wack. They again want wheat, 300 pud of it, when there simply isn't any more. Many have no bread. Those who still do, have rationed themselves or bought it in one way or another. Sunday before noon the people had to clean the chaff. For a half days work they got 30 pounds of grain. They stopped, it was not worthwhile. . . Then they run from one house to the other searching the attics where there is nothing because nothing was put up in the first place. The people have gone crazy.

It goes on like this day after day. The men go home at 1 A.M.

They are angry and we wake up as they walk by. At home their wives wait tensely, wondering what's happening now. When, oh when will it end? The majority are so tired of it all. Twenty-five pigs have died and what will happen to the other 50? At places the horses and cows are in slings because they cannot stand up. Many are dying. Come spring it won't be much different with the people. They have worked without getting any bread. . . . If only the fear was not always there one might be able to calm down. Only when the footsteps pass the door does the fear subside. . . .

Anna writes that her Gerhard has been a grave digger for six months. Many are dying there. The temperature there stands at minus 37 to 40. What are the people heaping upon themselves? All hell has broken loose. They eat and drink and create chaos and then think they have done wonderful things. . . .

The newspapers arrive irregularly. The paper is so bad and the print miserable that father cannot read them and we can't read everything either. There are lies upon lies about the tremendous reconstruction which is taking place. Father always says its only on paper and he is right. Here in the village there is no reconstruction to be seen. . . .

We wish you a happy and blessed Easter. Wishing you all good health.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

5

Sunday, July 3, 1932

You loved ones over there:

Wishing you good health which, thank God, we also enjoy. We received your letter of May 22 on June 14 and the one from June 12 on July 3. Everything was inside. Thank you so much for the pictures. We were so happy to see you even if only on pictures. . . . Yesterday we received your parcel. It took 24 days to get here. We waited for it with some anxiety thinking it might be lost, though the people assert that is impossible. It contained 5 pounds of sugar, almost 13 pounds of rice, 2.5 pounds lard; 2 spools of thread, one white, one black and 6 meters of green and black cloth. Thank you so much, the Lord reward you. I picked it up from the post office towards evening. When we, father, Liese and I, were

happily unpacking it and admiring the goods I suddenly turned around and again saw Mariechen sitting by the open sugar bag. How we all laughed. We want to use the cloth to make dresses for Liese and Mariechen. Both need them badly. We're going to make the heavy clothes in fall when Agnes is home. She misses home. . . . A week ago she sent a parcel with flour and noodles. They eat well there.

Here the workers are already eating fresh bread but get very little: one pound per day; the children under 10 get .25 pound per day. The older children and the women who don't work get nothing. That means starve or steal and the latter is a large scale operation. Some who you would never have suspected are stealing. The first thing I do in the morning is walk into the garden. The thieves have been quite gracious to us until now. They have only thinned the onions and the carrots. The three meals a day consist almost entirely of vegetables. We can't get enough [flour] to bake bread. We work and labor day after day and never have time to lay our hands on our lap. Yet if you had not helped us we would have probably starved. We're saving the rice for the winter so now we only eat vegetables. Father and the sisters went to church. I'm writing to you and cooking a bean soup on the side. I used the last bit of lard from you. We've lived on your lard for an entire year. We planted a lot of beans and should have a lot. They're coming along beautifully for almost no day passes without a rain shower. . . .

Three weeks ago there was a baptism in Lichtenau. Last Sunday we celebrated communion in our church and in between there were weddings and funerals. The Lichtenau congregation, which was always so proud of its large size, is completely without a minister and now has to be served by our ministers, upon whom they looked with some condescension. Their elder is in prison in the city of M. . . . Rev. P. Penner of Lichtfelde died last Sunday of a heart attack. He suffered from dropsy and spent the last 6 months sitting in a chair during both the day and the night. Now the wife is alone with two small sons. The children of his first wife have completely accepted the prevailing values. . . .

This year there is a lot of honey. The beekeeper has cared for them regularly and there was a lot of rain. Currently the hay is also being brought in. There is a lot of it this year but it is not being cared for. It is brought home half wet, placed in the loft where the roof has holes or simply thrown into a long row on the yard. Its such a mess. There are so few workers that they can't keep up. If only a tenth of them were administrators that would be more than enough, but here they are all world reformers. The summer fallow has to be mowed first [before the ploughing can

begin] for the weeds are so high that men, cattle and machines vanish among them. Is this the same out your way? Our newspapers say that it is nowhere as bad as where you live. We here live in a paradise without bread. . . .

There are a number here who have gotten money sent by their relatives but there is a great deal of swindling. Those who are to receive it directly through the mail don't receive it at all, it disappears in route. Others are to get it through Torgsin, but it takes an eternity before they get it, if they get it at all. So please note as I wrote you earlier, your money doesn't help us for then they are like ravaging wolves.

A few weeks ago I went to the city with N. When he went into the store to shop I went with him. It had everything one could wish but it was very expensive: a kilo rice cost 50 kopecks; sugar the same price; cream of wheat was 40 kopecks; flour 40 kopecks. Many are buying products for gold, finger rings and similar objects. Even that will have to end. There is much scolding and complaining everywhere. You can buy anything but it is terribly expensive and there is no money. . . .

In many places here there is whooping cough, diarrhea and typhus, probably due to starvation. The doctors have a great deal of work. . . .

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

6

Sunday, September 11, 1932

You loved ones over there:

Two weeks have passed since the last letter so I want to write again. . . .

We're eating melons and watermelons everyday. We help other people haul theirs home and they pay us in kind. No, we do not have our own patch. They did not even want to give us land for a garden. We went from one place to another and finally they give us a small plot. Supposedly we're bad people yet, when they have problems they come to us first. They come with their complaints and woes or with torn socks, clothes and shoes. We're simply the girls who can do everything: Liese sews pants and dresses,

Mariechen patches and knits, and I drive up to the garden patch once or twice a day to pick beans or get watermelons and melons. I go to sister-in-law Liese three times a week. I always come with hands full of cucumbers, tomatoes and at present, sweet peppers and apples. They want to move next week. That will be quite a process with all their goods and wares.

We hauled the manure bricks for fuel last week. It is so very busy and soon the cold winter is here again. We hope it will not be such an agitated one as last year. . . .

On August 30 we got a letter from a New York Bank which had been sent August 15. It did not take long to reach us. Someone had sent us five dollars. A few days later we received a card from the Torgsin in Melitopol that we could buy goods worth 9 rubles and 70 kopecks. Since both were in father's name I had to obtain power of attorney from the local soviet. Both papers cost me one ruble. I left on September 7, but before I went to Lichtenau I told my sisters to give me a substantial breakfast since it was a long way and I would spend the entire day in the city. There were five of us who left at 7 A.M. Our train left at 10 A.M. We had a good journey and arrived there at 11:30 A.M. My papers were all in order and I could quickly complete my business, but I couldn't get everything I wanted. I got two pud of flour at 3²⁰ a pud, four cans of sardines at 35 kopecks a piece and 7 1/3 meters of yellow cotton cloth at 26 kopecks per meter. I wanted sugar but they only gave one kilo per pud of flour and then one had to buy herring, but father can't eat these so I took sardines instead. I wanted [cooking] oil or porridge and rice, but they said they had none in stock. Oh there is swindle everywhere. Many had to return home without accomplishing anything because their papers were not in order. They accepted all my papers. It was a beehive of activity. The people offered everything: rings, earrings, broaches, arm bands -- but they got very little for it. One woman stripped the ring off her finger and got 3 meters of cotton cloth for it at 23 kopecks a meter. Yes that's the way it is, if they don't use force they use cunning to get what they want. We boarded the train at quarter of eight in the evening and left half an hour later. It was nine-thirty when we arrived in Lichtenau. A vehicle was there to pick me up, though no one was to know that I was along or there would be trouble. We entered the neighboring village from the rear. I was happy to get home again. Before we left the *Torgsin* we demanded a paper to show how much flour we had bought. If we had not done this it could, as has happened, be forcibly taken from us. We are always happy to be within our own four walls. Even there they will come to inspect. As soon as they come they ask on what we living. Fortunately the letters and parcels are proof of our

livelihood. Then they can't bother us and leave somewhat ashamedly. They even wish us all the best. . . It is dangerous to journey with the flour. On the train many asked us where we had gotten it. So far we've gotten safely home each time without male accompaniment. . . .

The weeks pass so quickly. Soon its fall and winter. We'll probably have to sit in the dark. We still have some kerosene but we have to be very careful with it. There is still some available. Liese is our seamstress. She is always sewing pants and blouses. Now and then there are a few goods in the co-operative, but they are so expensive that the majority cannot buy them. Cotton cloth is 1⁵⁰ or 2 rubles per meter, a spool of thread 35 kopecks, but such things as sugar or porridge are not available. At the bazaar sunflower oil costs 10 rubles. Who can afford to grease his mouth at such prices? Eggs are 5 rubles for 10; butter 6 to 7 rubles a pound -- and things keep going up. Enough of this. . . All the best wishes and warm greetings from all of us.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

7

Sunday, November 27, 1932

You loved ones over there:

Now that three weeks have passed since our last letter I will write again. . . Our father is still sick and will probably not get better. He is tired of life and wants to go home. He still gets up every morning then lies on the bench near the oven and groans. He always has a high temperature in the evening. It has never been as bad as it was last night: he could not breathe properly and his heart was not functioning well. He sat up almost all night. Liese read his favorite song from the hymnal (number 566) which calmed him down.

He said it might be his last night on earth. He has lost a great deal of weight and is only skin and bones, yet he still has an appetite. This morning the neighbor lady brought some meat and we cooked it for lunch. He liked it very much. We had also boiled some rice. Thanks to you he almost always eats rice with sugar. Peter and Liese were just here. Who knows how long they will be able to visit their old father? He doesn't say much because he finds

it difficult, yet during the night, with some interruptions, he speaks of his concerns. If its God's will, we will let him depart this earthly life in which there is so much misery, pain and suffering, even though we find it difficult. He had to endure so much in his old days and still faces constant anxiety. One sighs and often prays: "Make an end, Oh Lord, make an end with all our suffering". . . .

Today we celebrated the first advent in our church. Peter preached the sermon. He looks better since Friday. He gets the fever again and again and all the medicine and shots don't seem to help. On Friday Dr. Schmidt gave him a dangerous inoculation on his right elbow. It is only used in extreme cases. Now he looks better. . . .

For four days we, namely the two of us and Liese Ens from the neighboring village, worked in the church every afternoon. We prepared the upstairs mens section for services in the cold winter. We sawed off the steps on the one side and closed the hole with an old slaughter table. Then we cleaned and sealed the windows and cemented an oven in the middle. Now we don't have to freeze in church. Generally speaking the church building seems too large. The women's side is usually fairly full, but on the men's side there are often no more than five. They always claim they don't have time. Will they someday have time to die? Well God won't ask them. . . .

You have no idea how great the crisis is here. Those who have their loved ones abroad only live from the Torgsin. Yet there are those who write that they can't send anything because they have to get ahead. That hurts. They don't know what it is like here. It is indescribable. There are those here who only have cooked beets on the table for their meal. You need have no pangs of conscience. You have done what you could for your dear father during his last days. He thanks you not with words but we can see it in his eyes. . . .

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

According to her reckoning, Susan's letter of May 31, 1934, is number 21. Yet it is one of only two in the collection. Letters from Canada are still reaching them, but possibly their letters were not reaching Canada. The second letter of August 3, 1934, is number 28.

Sister Liese lists some of the highlights of village life during the first half of 1934. First, there is a malaria epidemic in the village and quinine is in short supply. Secondly, the last service was held in the Lindenau Church that Sunday. "It was probably the only place in the entire colony where there were still services". Finally, unwelcome visitors on the afternoon of May 26 demanded a 100 ruble contribution in order to feed the poor women and children.

Sister Agnes provides an equally dismal picture in a letter of October 6, 1934. Both Liese and Susan have been ill in bed for five weeks, Liese with malaria and pneumonia, Susan with typhus. Several acquaintances have been exiled, one of them for 10 years. The harassment by local officials continues. It is difficult to find comfort since all the churches stand empty. A bank draft has arrived but the *Torgsin* has no flour, potatoes, porridge, oil or sugar.

You loved ones over there:

Since Liese has already written a great deal so I'll just add a few lines. . . We are happy you are well, which is not the case with us. Liese and I alternatively have the fever. No house here has been spared. You are very busy to be sure but its almost unforgivable to let us wait almost four weeks for a letter. At least send a card. We thought an accident had happened. . . .

During May we received a bank draft for 8 marks from K.C. Tiessen, Ruthven, Ontario. I don't know how they got our address. I've already sent a thank you card. I hope they get it. God bless the giver. Until now He has helped wonderfully and will continue to do so. That is our confidence. How fearfully yet differently we all look into the future. There are those of us who still have the hope and assurance that our heavenly Father will not forget us in

spite of all the hardships. Then there are those who have no hold on anything and yet think they can do everything. Now they realize how helpless they are, but they won't acknowledge it. Oh how impoverished are the people who rely on their own strength. We have to endure a great deal but the Lord helps us. I think we've reached the point where the Lord is calling a halt to things. Come to your senses humankind and think what you've done. They are looking to see whether there are clouds arising and whether it will rain. It does not and the vegetable garden hasn't sprouted. Yet if we are to remain alive the Lord will have ways and means to keep us. If not He will give us the grace to depart for home where all earthly sorrow ceases. . . .

God be with you and don't let us wait so long for letters. This I beg of you in love,

Your sister Susan

2

Friday, August 3, 1934

You loved ones over there:

. . . Liese has had no fever for some time. Agnes had it only once two weeks ago, but it was terrible. We stood by helplessly. She shivered severely and flailed with her arms and legs as if she were mad for half an hour. We placed compresses on her kidneys and she became calmer. Mariechen is very weak. . . yet she feels she must work. She has to be treated delicately and I seem to get along with her the best. Liese is quite impulsive. I have to be the mediator and it takes all of my powers of persuasion to calm things down. Liese means well but is too impetuous and Mariechen is too sensitive, but one has to accept people as they are. I feel the fever from time to time, but I have no time to be sick. I'm almost always on the go -- looking for chickens. I'm sick and tired of the whole affair, but there is a must involved and then one goes through wind and high weather. I have already made four journeys in this respect and if I make two more, things should be settled for a while.

Agnes went to work yesterday. Today Liese is patching the childrens' woolen socks, Mariechen is chatting with the sister-in-law, and I'm writing. We have received all your letters up to now. The one from July 1 arrived on July 19 and yesterday, August 2, we received the one from July 17. Thank you so much for them, we wait for them with such anticipation. The others always have to

calm me down when one of your letters takes longer than usual. Your letters are the only joy in our sad existence.

Almost hourly we are waiting for them to come, list our things and expel us from our house. Not only we but many others find themselves in the same situation. We don't attend any meetings, but others who have nothing better to do and who love to gossip come by. Liese gets terribly upset as do the rest of us, but I can be quiet and she can't. She says exactly what she thinks and that doesn't help matters. One evening when we again had such a scene after the person had left, I took the Testament in hand, opened it and my eyes fell upon Psalm 91:10ff. I cannot tell you how the words comforted me. He is the Father of orphans and will continue to be with us. Today, August 3, we read the verse from Psalm 145:18, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him in truth". Even if the Lord does not always hear according to our desires, He can still calm our hearts if we submit to Him and allow Him to do what He finds to be good. He will look after our affairs even though it sometimes seems there is no God in heaven. Through Satan rages and raves the Lord will again stretch forth his hand as He once did upon the sea and say: "peace, be still," and the waves will become calm. Do not despair, only look up from whence comes our help. We are walking through the dark valley and when our time finally comes what wonderful lot is ours: finally free from earthly suffering and sorrow.

Two weeks ago our neighbor, the widow H. Wark, died at the age of 64 years. She slowly faded away like our father. Please tell Franz Cornies. Her daughter and two sons wander about, homeless and abandoned. You also wanted to know about our former neighbor M. He died several years ago in northern exile. She returned with the children. They again arrested the eldest and the third son and sent them north. The second son Jasch escaped. He is everywhere and nowhere. He lived like his father: he is happy as long as he can weal and deal. Hans disappeared for three years. Last December word had it that Hans was here again. His mother and the four youngest sons had been here in the village for a year. He is still the same old Hans. He has a big mouth and thinks he knows everything. He was here again today with some news, just like his Dad used to do. Two weeks ago his mother and the youngest sons disappeared one night. Jasch had come to get them with all their things. Some people know how to do it. Hans and Abram are working here on a Sovkoz, but they will probably vanish like many others. Three of their daughters are domestics with dignitaries in Moscow, the fourth, Greta, works at high German dignitaries in Kiev. . . .

And now to answer your most important question: how many bank drafts did we receive this year? We have received four from

you and one from Tiessens. I picked up the first one on February 19, the second on March 19, the third on April 21, then Tiessen's on May 15, and last week we got your last remission, 12²⁰ in German currency. We haven't picked it up yet, though we need it badly. I was going to go with the sister-in-law yesterday, who had received three bank drafts since her letter was published in the *Rundschau*. I suppose she will get many more. . . Please don't do that with mine, don't broadcast it from the bell tower, that's not my style. However difficult our lot, the Lord knows what we need. Until now we have received no parcels, only the four bank drafts from you and one from Tiessens. There is little available in Torgsin or I would have gone there yesterday. We heard there was no flour, rolled oats, or rice. It would have done me no good. I only wanted flour, some sugar and a bit of oil. That's the way it always is here -- promises, promises. The sister-in-law had gotten the most expensive flour at 19 rubles per kilo. She only brought 5 kilos home. Next week we both want to go. There are always difficulties. They place so many obstacles in our way, but the Lord keeps opening doors. What is sent is our only nourishment. Rye flour has been 8 rubles per kilo, the cheapest wheat flour 13 rubles. Sugar costs 28 rubles a kilo, sunflower oil 37 kopecks, butter is 60 kopecks a kilo, and tallow 50 kopecks [per kilo]. These are the items most people buy. The local authorization [for Torgsin purchases] is becoming very problematical. We got it this time but they told Liese that next time none would be given until all our debts are paid. Where are we supposed to get 300 rubles? We have the firm assurance that the Lord will help as He has until now. During the first year they always returned our authorization. Now in the second year they take it and do not return it, even if one asked for it. Recently they have begun to return them. The women are becoming very aggressive and saying: "If you do not return them we can't come back and will have to return our bank drafts to those who sent them". Under no circumstances do they want that. They don't like it, but a number of people have done it this way. Sister Grete who was refused an authori still had one from three years ago. She took it and went there. They gave her everything and returned her authori. She has already used it twice and now she wants to go with me since she received another bank draft two days before we did. Yet its nerve racking and always such a long journey before we can finally eat.

There is one thing after another which sours life. It seems the women can handle it better than the men. The men seem to be cowardly, the women by contrast are forthright and say what they think. They are simply incensed about everything: their men are being taken from them and they have to live through thick and thin. I still have two old authorizations and Agnes has one. If

they don't give us new ones these will do.

August 4

I want to continue the letter. Yesterday I wanted to get some chickens, but then we got another big assessment. We were dumbfounded. We can impossibly pay it. Come what may, there will be no more paying because we want to use what we have for buying food. Many people feel that way. We have been disenfranchised. We were fearful as to what they would charge us for the garden plot. Think of it -- 250 rubles. And that's for a garden partially planted under trees with no cucumbers, 10 tomato plants, a few carrots and beets, several pumpkin plants and a few pails of potatoes. That's the entire garden. What do you think? Are we dealing with madmen or with intelligent people? Well I won't break my head over the problem. After we understood and discussed the matter I spontaneously began to sing. My sister-in-law was amazed for I had not done so for a long time. I simply had to "sing" it off my chest. We are calm even though it is difficult at times. It will pass. Then too we are not suffering alone. We are also supposed to contribute 125 rubles of our earnings -- as if they don't get everything already. But they have no intelligence, only a big mouth that screeches. . . .

We can hardly believe how rapidly our rabbits are multiplying. There are so many young and do they ever eat. We bought a rooster a week ago. He is to be pan fried after I've been to the Torgsin. . . . Yesterday we were given a plateful of tomatoes. At least now I know what they taste like, though they were very small. The cucumbers at the bazaar are all yellowish and very bitter. Fruit is very expensive: a pail of apples 12 rubles, a pail of pears gathered from the ground 15 rubles; a saucer of plums 60 kopecks; butter 6 rubles a pound; eggs ⁴⁵⁰ for 10; a saucer of cottage cheese 1 ruble; a watermelon, and there are very few of them, 3 rubles; bread is ⁴⁵⁰ per kilo. One has to have a fat purse in order to shop. Tomorrow I want to go buy some cabbages. They are cheaper on Sunday than on Wednesday. On Sunday a kilo costs 50 kopecks and during the week when only the women sell ¹⁵⁰. On Sundays the artels bring their produce, which they sell more cheaply.

I want to take this letter directly to the station. . . Pray for us that we may have the strength to endure in this short life.

I request this in love,

Your sister Susan

Two major events dominate the family experience in 1935. Mariechen dies early in the year, though no information has survived as to the cause or circumstance of her passing. Secondly because of harassment in the village the family decides to move to Melitopol late in 1934. At that stage both Susan and Liese are still recovering from severe illness. They find quarters just outside the city on a mountainside. Susan comments that they have been torn from their home and have begun a life of wandering. Her concern is prophetic.

Survival is of paramount concern during the first months of 1935. It is difficult to find a market for their handiwork in the new surroundings and the sisters seek to get money for food by selling their personal possessions. The letters make frequent reference to food, food prices and the stocking of adequate supplies. The situation eases by mid-summer thanks to the availability of work and the bank drafts which are still arriving from abroad. Unfortunately the *Torgsin* is now situated in Berdyansk, which means a long and expensive journey for Susan.

1

Melitopol
Sunday, March 10, 1935

You dear ones over there:

. . . We received your letter of February 22. It was forwarded to us. Much has happened. Mariechen has gone home. During the recent past she had great difficulty breathing. Now she is home with the Lord. She need not starve or freeze any longer, she is free of all earthly suffering and sorrow. We grant her her rest with our whole heart. Did you receive the funeral announcement.

We still have not received your gift of love. If you send it let it come directly to us, not via Germany because then we do not receive it. It is very difficult for us. We drink *Prips* three times a day and eat a small piece of dried bread. That is all. In order to get the bread we sell anything which still has value. Everything is available, but there is no money. Agnes and I went out today but could not sell anything. This goes on day after day and often one has to ask oneself "Oh Lord why?" Yet He has always helped

and will continue to help. No one needs our handwork here. When it is warmer we want to try to work in a vegetable garden or park. Currently it is still too cold. We also have to recover from everything we have lived through. It was a difficult winter.

We simply could not stay at home any longer. We had to come here. We've been free from harassment and can calmly go to sleep at night. We live high on the mountain and have a wonderful view of the entire city. Please don't forget us and pray that the Lord gives us strength to bear our burden. . . . My feet are still swollen and I can't move around as quickly as formerly. This is the result of the fever. Enough.

In love,

Your Susan

2

Sunday, March 17, 1935

You loved ones over there:

Wishing you good health which, thank God, we too enjoy. We received your letter of February 17 on March 12. Until now all have arrived. Here at our new home I have recovered remarkably. We have a difficult winter behind us. I lay in bed from September 1 to December 1 and also a good deal in December until mid-January. Then my feet began to swell but the fever stopped. I had to learn to walk again for it seemed that all the pain had gone into the feet. This morning, for the first time after the illness they are thin again. Recently when I walked each step was painful. Today it is considerably better. The doctor in the village said that the muscles have to redevelop after the illness and that takes almost a year. I did not think I would ever recover. The crisis came during the night of September 17. I don't know for how many hours I lay unconscious. Everyone thought I was going to die. Sister Liese once wet my lips with a piece of lemon. I opened my eyes and saw them assembled around my bed, but then I lost consciousness until morning. I lay like that for six weeks and could not think clearly. Things became better very gradually. Typhus and malaria are terrible illnesses. I was unable to raise my head. Then there was the external pressure, those elements which came and listed all our possessions. There was a power greater than ours, otherwise we would have perished. It seemed impossible for us to move for we were without money or food. When we came here we had 5

pounds of porridge, 1 1/2 pounds of flour and half a pud of small potatoes, which we traded for my woolen Sunday stockings just before we left. Here we are selling one thing after the other so that we at least have bread with our *Prips*. Yesterday I sold my leather shoes, the lovely yellow ones I bought in Moscow five years ago. I did it reluctantly but I couldn't wear them because of my swollen feet. Secondly they were too pretty for these times. In our old home I couldn't wear them for they were too striking. We mostly walk in our homemade shoes, manufactured from the old fur blanket. The leather ones from mother are in very poor condition. I'm no longer young and do not have the means to be beautifully attired. I'm over the hill. If only we had something for our stomach.

We are not getting your bank drafts because they are being sent via Germany. The one we had word of on December 6 was the one which you had sent a second time, one in my name, the second in Agnes' name. If possible send it again for ours has been lost. Please check. It's happened to others here and they have checked and got it. We would be so happy for it because we need it so much. . . We've had comforting and encouraging visits from people like brother P. Penner. Quite a number of our co-religionists are living here. . . We have a nice cozy room and are heating with wood and coal. Today for lunch we cooked bean soup: two cups of beans and a cup of porridge. This is a veritable banquet for us, but its not enough to satisfy the three of us. We've been starving so much that it would take quite a while to satisfy our hunger.

Currently I'm knitting white summer socks for the W. Warken-tins' girls. That provides some money, if only for a few days of food. Most people here want store bought stockings so that there is not much money to be earned. Perhaps we will get work in the vegetable gardens or in the summer fruit. Some think it will work, others are doubtful because we are disenfranchised. Most of our people who have come here are in the same situation. We comfort ourselves with the thought that the Lord led us here. He will know why and for what purpose. We are to trust Him and be still, He will lead gloriously.

We want to plant some parsley in pots so that we have a few greens for our soup. We simply can't buy everything for our pocketbook is too thin. Large onions cost 50 kopecks each, the small ones 3 rubles for a saucer full. Beans cost 55 to 80 kopecks per glass and 5 medium sized potatoes 1 ruble. Everything one may want is available, but one cannot satisfy ones hunger. Milk costs from 1 to 1³⁰. Bread from sifted wheat flour 2 rubles; rye bread 1 ruble; carrots 40 kopecks, cucumbers 15 kopecks each; green preserved tomatoes 40 kopecks per kilo; fish of all kinds, fresh and salted, are also available but I don't know how expensive

they are. . . .

We live so peaceably here, something we could not do during the last half year in our old home. We haven't missed it. The people were already mostly strangers. By now the village is more or less Russian. Acquaintances write that another 12 Russian families have been accepted. There are also Russians living in our house, but it no longer pains us. As long as the heavenly home is secure, where there is no parting.

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

3

Sunday, May 5, 1935

You loved ones over there:

With this letter we wish you good health which thank God, we also enjoy. Yesterday we received your letter of April 7. It was in route for a long time. At the same time we received a bank draft which had been sent on April 12. Thank you. The Lord reward you for what you have done for us. Sometimes I think you're giving too much and cutting yourself short. It really bothers me at times. You seem to be the only ones that think of us, but that's saying too much. A month ago we received a bank draft on my name which was still addressed to our old home. It was sent from Chicago. It had no first name but we think it was from Mrs. Fast, formerly from Blumstein. I sent a thank you letter to the bank. Hopefully she gets it. If she is not far from you greet her with the words: "I was hungry and you fed me."

When I think of everything we've lived through I sometimes sit down and have a good cry. Yet the Lord's intentions are filled with love. He will not give us a greater burden than we can bear. When the crisis was at its worst, the Lord has always been on hand and helped. He will continue to do so.

Things have been fairly busy recently. Yes the Lord says call on me when in need and He has helped wonderfully. He sent dear people to us who brought us knitting and crocheting work. I recently completed 9 hats for ladies and their children. Liese crocheted collars and all three of us knit socks. There are quite a few others who have ordered socks and hats. Tomorrow we want to deliver what we have completed and pick up some more.

Whenever there is a big holiday everything is supposed to be ready. They bring work at the last minute and then they want it as soon as possible. That means working fast. On April 30, I finished a hat in 4 hours but then one hardly has time to think. The sisters are not too keen on this [sort of rush work] so I have to do it. I really don't mind as long as there is work.

A week ago we celebrated Easter according to the old calendar. We went to a Russian [Baptist] Church both morning and evening. We also went to the orthodox church but that was very different. At home this was impossible. There was no holiday, no Sunday. There was even fuss if we dressed up in Sunday clothes. Here it is completely different. No one really cares what we do here. Here it's better to be dressed properly than shabbily. Here we can sit in front of our door which we could not do over there. You can believe us when we say we have never longed to go back. You cannot imagine how difficult they made life for us.

I have already gained some weight. Thanks to all the difficulties my arms had gotten so thin that I could encircle them everywhere with my thumb and mid-finger except at the elbow. Now I can't do that anymore. The legs are much better as well. I'm really my old self except for the feet. If I walk to the city three times during the day they swell up and hurt

The prices of certain items are to be reduced in the next little while: porridge, flour, noodles, sugar, bread, eggs, butter and sweets. That makes us very happy Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

You loved ones over there:

With this we wish you the best of health which we, thank God, still enjoy. . . .

Sister Liese and I were in church today. We left at 9 a.m. and returned at 12.30. We heard a good sermon in German in the style we were used to. Reverend David Reimer, who comes from the upper villages, preached first in Russian, then in German. The text was Jesus and Samaritan Women. He expounded the text clearly and precisely. It was meant for us. Among other things he said that God never proceeds without a plan. He always has a plan for

us even though we often don't understand His ways. In fall when they told us to move here it seemed impossible to us. Both of us were ill with little prospect of recovery. Then there were all the moving costs and we had nothing left to live on. Now we have to confess that the Lord did it all, we needed only to be still and follow. Though we did not know where to turn He always helped. Men thought to do evil to us, but God turned it into good.

A lady from our home village who moved here a few months ago, moved to her family in Siberia three weeks ago. Before she left she said to us several times that we should follow. She said the same thing to us before she moved here. She was entirely sincere. Who knows where circumstances will lead us. If it's supposed to be, the Lord will know the ways and means. When one is torn from ones home a life of wandering begins until we reach our heavenly home where all suffering and pain has an end. How glorious it will be when there will be an end to all the difficulties we have to deal with here on earth.

The *Torgsin* has been closed here and moved to Berdyansk. We tried to spend everything you sent us. Agnes and I went for three consecutive days and dragged everything home with our hands and backs. It was not easy but the thought of filling our pantry and not always worrying what we should eat took precedence. To think that the Lord had given you such willing hands. Agnes went four times and I went three times until everything was brought home. We bought 77 kilos of rye flour, 16 kilos of wheat flour, 3 kilos of sugar, 4 kilos of rice, 11 kilos of barley porridge, 1 kilo of fish, 1 1/4 kilos of apricots and a half kilo of soda. We wanted lard but they had run out of it. It is difficult not to be able to get things from the corner store any longer. Yet a man of God told us that this too was an act of God's love. Who knows what purpose it will serve?

We still do a lot of knitting and crocheting. Yesterday we again got a whole bag of torn socks to mend. I would really like to do some other kind of work for a change, but this is the type of work that is in demand here.

Our small vegetable garden looks very good, but we do need some rain. . . .

Have you received all our letters and cards? Please let us know. With best wishes and greetings from all of us.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

You loved ones over there:

With this letter we want to wish you the best of health which, thank God, we too enjoy. Last Sunday, July 7, we received your letter of June 16 with the picture. Thank you so much. . . .

When I write letters my thoughts traverse the entire world, that's why my letters are so helter-skelter. We have been very busy with knitting recently. Yesterday we finished the gloves and socks which Mrs. H. Warkentine (Liese Mierau) brought from our home village. She is mentally ill and came here to see the doctor. She stayed with us for a week. She wanted to see Jakob Wiebe (formerly of Lichtfelde) but he has not been home for a long time. His one wife and daughter are here. He went to the Caucasus with his other wife. A month ago he sent a telegram that he was coming home but has not arrived yet. A German lady told us that in route he was overcome by his alcoholism and died. This alcoholism often overcame him. It lasted for 14 days during which he only drank. When it passed he was overcome by great fear and constantly shouted: "I am lost and going to be lost". How deeply the poor man has sunk. And yet those few words indicated that the Lord was still pursuing him. His youngest brother with his wife and two children lives across the street from us. . . .

A few hours ago we got a letter from P. He soon hopes to be with his loved ones, perhaps in August or the beginning of September. It is doubtful whether he will be able to stay here in the long run. Most of those who come home are soon returned to where they came from. It's best for them to go somewhere, where no one knows them. Our life has become that of a wanderer. We are without rest and cannot stay anywhere for long until we reach that big, beautiful, free house of the Father above. There is such a longing in the human breast for something better, which this poor world cannot give. How humankind strives for happiness. Yet the happiness which sustains and supports man in this difficult testing period is only known to a few. The majority are running headlong into destruction. There has never been so much fighting, strife and anger as now.

We have had rain every day this week and the vegetables are doing well. Lettuce is 10 kopecks a kilo but the rest is very expensive, especially the onions. We cook most of the soups without them, for 5 small ones cost 30 kopecks, potatoes are 1 ruble a kilo. We really can't afford them. There are a lot of tomatoes, even our few plants have quite a few. They should soon be ripening. . . .

This week we had a letter from sister Anna. She is so concerned about her children. The eldest has been sent into exile, the girls have to work very hard and David is being driven from one place to the next and cannot find peace. . . .

I was just interrupted. Mrs. Klassen, wife of the former Halbstadt elder came by for an hour. She is a lovely lady. He also often comes by to cheer us up. The Bergmanns from Rueckenau are also frequent guests at our house. We live near the street, the children on the yard speak German and that is so appealing that many drop in. We're not used to it and are often tired of it. . . . A warm greeting from us all.

In love,

Your sister Susan

6

Sunday, September 11, 1935

You loved ones over there:

With this we wish you the best of health in body and soul which, thank God, we also enjoy. Yesterday we received your letter of August 19. Many thanks. We were eagerly waiting for a letter from you. A few days ago on September 7 we received your bank draft. Our deepest thanks. May God reward you. We have not written for a long time because we thought the letters were all being lost

We got a letter from brother Kornelius on August 15. His situation is a difficult one yet he is calm and trusting in God. He asked us to greet all the brothers and sisters-inlaw. They have offered to free him if he is willing to settle there and have his family come. He has applied and should know in a month. Unfortunately he had not heard from his wife since May and did not know where she was. A fellow prisoner who was released went to the Caucasus to look for her and then inform him. The poor brother is to be pitied: sentenced to 10 years and then to have such a wife. He says there are many sorts of berries in the forest which they can gather for the winter. He likes the region very much. They want to settle in the mountains

Our days are filled with work of various kinds. Agnes is ironing. She washed yesterday. Liese is dyeing wool. She unravelled her wool jacket because it was looking shabby. She is dyeing it brown like it was. I will then knit a new jacket for Agnes according to

the latest style. After all we are now city folk and at least the youngest one must be fashionable. I also want to make a blouse for her from various patches. On the side I'm knitting some stockings for a lady. In three weeks an older lady wants to bring us a great deal of knitting work and then there are prospects for knitting work from other sources.

Liese is spinning for a German lady. In exchange we get milk several times a week. Today we had a milk mousse for lunch. We're eating a lot of vegetables now. We have a lovely bag of dried carrots which cost 21 kopecks. Fruit is too expensive for us. Carrots with rice or beans are wonderful. We will not be canning any tomatoes for winter. Now and then we buy a few for eating, they cost 22 kopecks a kilogram. . . .

More and more of our people are still coming here. Bread is now available as long as there is money. We need about 2 kilos per day. The majority eat one kilo per person per day. . . .

For a time Agnes and I thought of moving elsewhere but we have decided to stay as long as possible. . . .

Once again wishing you all the best.

In love,

Your sister Susan

7

Saturday, October 26, 1935

You loved ones over there:

We received your letter from September 24 on October 17. Thank you. We are always happy when a letter arrives . . . We are so busy here that we hardly have time to write. Tomorrow we want to go to the sea (Berdyansk) and we'll take this letter along. We received word that Agnes was to pick up (at the Torgsin) what you sent last year in December. I wonder if it will still be there. Our sister-in-law went two weeks ago but our sister could not go at that time. She (sister-in-law) is very busy and I help her a lot. Today for instance I stood in line for potatoes for her. We each got a pud. There were 50 people in front of us and 100 behind. There are lots of potatoes and they are cheap, 32 kopecks a kilo. We want to buy some more when we have money. . . .

Liese is currently patching socks for a German lady, 7 pairs of them. We get 1.20 per pair. She also crochets collars for children and adults. Now I have to do all the business for us especially

since Agnes who does not know much Russian. I go to the city three or four times a day, though sometimes only once. . . . then the sister-in-law and I have also undertaken to sew curtains: we get 12 rubles for each. I gladly do everything as long as I'm well. . . .

We finally had word from P. He hopes to be released this year. . . .

We will probably remain in these quarters over winter. We're still enjoying nice warm weather and are only heating to cook our meals. We're burning sawdust. Yesterday we got two large sackfuls. Enough. Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

The fortunes of Agnes, Liese and Susan improve substantially. Agnes gets a job as a domestic in Melitopol and is paid 25 rubles per month. Susan and Liese find seasonal work as fruit pickers earning 3 rubles and 50 kopecks per day. There is the other traditional source of revenue -- mending and knitting. Fruit and vegetables are in abundant supply and so prices at the local markets are low. Then too the sisters find accommodation with a prominent Russian family in the city in exchange for guarding the house and looking after the garden. Since their quarters are not winterized they move again in September.

In January one of the sisters enunciates a concern rarely uttered but often felt. "We spend the holidays quietly but we miss and long for spiritual fellowship. One often asks oneself: 'Will our Mennonitism be totally destroyed?' There are no longer any German services and the churches are used for other purposes". (January 26, 1936). On April 26 another sister writes: "Today is Sunday. The children went to school and our brother went to work. . . . You will be in church today. For us everything is destroyed but thank God we can still read His Word". In the following month there was another letter: "It is soon Pentecost, but how different things are from earlier times when we could celebrate it in spiritual fellowship". (May 17, 1936)

1

Wednesday, January 1, 1936

You loved ones over there:

First we wish you all a happy and blessed new year. Thank God we are all well and we wish you the same. We received your last letter of December 4 on December 21, that is before Christmas. . . .

The children got many gifts. Lieschen a belt, a ball, a pencil and thread for sewing; Leni a belt, a toy, a pencil, a doll with a bed; the lad got a construction set with which he can build various things. The crane is the most important. When one pressed a button the whistle blew, but by breakfast the whistle had broken. Most of the toys came from Agnes' employer. She is moving and her daughter Rita has more than enough toys. Yesterday she

brought home a fine summer hat which she got from her lady. . . .

During the last month my nerves were a bit on edge. I had too much knitting: 7 pairs of finger gloves and 2 caps. Then I carried all the water, went to get coal innumerable times, picked up all the food from the city, then went to Berdyansk for two days. . . I have gained some weight. It must be all that running about in the fresh air. My arms have never been so thick and my cheeks have filled out. . . .

The holidays are beginning for our children here and will last until January 12. We'll be glad when they are all over. Ones head almost splits for all the noise. They all have such loud voices that one has to hold ones ears, yet one is not supposed to get nervous. Enough. Wishing you all the best and a warm greeting to all the relatives.

In love,

Your sister Susan

2

Sunday, January 26, 1936

You loved ones over there:

. . . Three weeks have passed since our last letter. During the week we don't take time write and on Sunday we lack the energy. I went back to our old home for a few days and was warmly received by old acquaintances. They wanted me to stay a few days longer but I felt I had to return, the others would be waiting for me. I stayed mostly at our old neighbor H.W. She tried to feed me everything she had. . . .

You want to know how we live. The floor is earthen. Its always dusty but what can you expect with 16 feet walking around. You would say our sleeping accommodations are miserable, but we're happy and thankful for what we have. Next to the door stands a chest, then a frame which is Liese's and my bed. . . Along the other wall is a long bench. We place a chair and a small chest beside it. Then various things are laid on top to level it, we put a mattress on top and that is Agnes' bed. If she decides to stretch her feet almost hit my face. When we make all the beds in the evening we can hardly turn around. Then during the day I have to rearrange chests and baskets. We have one window. There is

no table, because we could not bring ours along. The sister-in-law brought a children's table and we use it. We have no chair, only two small footstools on which we sit. The main thing is that there is something on the table. . . . We have to work hard for our keep. . . .

In love,

Your sister Susan

3

June 7, 1936

. . . Liese was sick, much sicker than she thought. We thought it was going to be fatal. She coughed a great deal, had tremendous headaches, ate nothing and was terribly nervous. . . . We soon hope to have our own quarters. We, and especially Liese, need the rest.

Agnes was home yesterday. She comes every sixth day because the lady is home then. The old mother is bedridden and cannot be left alone. The lady works in a clinic. I would like to go to work but I can't leave my sister at home for she can't get the water nor the firewood. . . .

Susan

4

Sunday, July 19, 1936

You loved ones over there:

Wishing you the best of health which, thank God, we also enjoy. We received your card of June 29 on July 17. Thank you so much. We're always happy for any news from you. . . .

Liese has recovered. She works in the garden all day long. First there were the cherries, now the apricots. None of them are sold. We eat as many as we want and dry them or can them. The land lady has canned a great deal. There is a great deal of fruit this year. The vegetable gardens and the crops look good. We will have our daily bread if the Lord gives us health so that we can work. We don't demand a lot and are satisfied with what we have. . . .

We have good accommodation and are satisfied. We still need something for winter and the Lord will have counsel even though we don't know what to do. The land lady wanted me to work for her. I tried it for a few days but it is too difficult for me. I can't work like I used to. My body has had to endure too much and I am always tired. . . I was sick for a few days with body pains and a tremendous headache. Liese gets upset with me and says I should let her help me, but I want to spare her as well.

While I am writing Liese is making lunch -- a carrot soup without meat which tastes wonderful. . . .

Its 1 P.M. We've just finished lunch. It was very appetizing. I bought the carrots at the market today at 40 kopecks a kilo. Greens were 30 kopecks a kilo, onions also 30 kopecks a kilo. Tomatoes were still very expensive, 3 rubles a kilo, but they will soon be cheaper. Cucumbers are 50 kopecks. Liese wanted them so badly otherwise I would not have bought the crooked things.

Torn socks still provide plenty of work. Whenever we have a few spare minutes the needles are literally twirling. Liese patches. She loves the work and does a very fine job of it. I reinforce the thin socks bought at the store. No one knows how to do it. The ladies always say how interested they are in learning but when it comes to doing it themselves they have no idea and can't catch on. They are only too happy when someone else cares about their torn stockings and restores them. . . .

Tomorrow we will have been living here for 4 weeks. Its so quiet and peaceable and yet its not home. Will we ever find a home on this earth or will we always be wanderers until we reach our heavenly home, where there is no earthly suffering, where God will wipe all tears from our eyes. One is often so tired of all which torments and oppresses us. One has no desire to do anything, one would only like to sleep and forget.

We have a good landlady. She often comes to visit us during the day, sits a while and chats and asks questions. She needs love and gives love. We want to do all in our power to help her. She is thankful for the smallest favor. Some say she is hard to get along with but we can't complain. She works all day with nervous men, no wonder she is sometimes crusty. She is good to us but you have to know how to get along with her. . . .

Wishing you much happiness and blessing in your difficult work.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, October 11, 1936

You loved ones over there:

Wishing you the best of health which we also enjoy. We received your last letter of September 6 with the pictures on September 24. Thank you so much. . . Last week I went, or better walked, back home. On the way there we had a short ride with a car, otherwise we walked. We returned by rail. It was difficult for the sister-in-law, but not for me. I'm a good walker. We returned yesterday with many goods. . . .

I'm on my feet almost everyday collecting life's essentials for us and others. We have already paid for coal and the brother is going to supply us with wood. That is one worry less. We still have our work and our health, what better can we wish for. Until now the Lord has given us our daily bread and if we only trust him He will give us above what we are able to ask or think. We've experienced that so often. . . .

A few days ago we had a letter from brother K.. He still hopes to be free this year but is not sure where to go then. We are going to write to him and tell him to come here. He sent us his picture. When I came home Agnes showed it to me but did not tell me who it was. Well I've got a good eye and recognized him right away. He looks like his mother. He is doing well. His days are filled with drawing plans from morning until late. Whenever he has free time he goes into the forest to eat berries. They are very abundant. . . .

We are still happy patching a pile of torn socks. How many thoughts are knit into them. Knitting is still my happiest activity, I rarely spend a whole day at it though. I have to look after the whole outside business and it makes me nervous. . . .

We have a lovely warm accommodation. I'm always hot and Liese is always cold, but she isn't active enough.

Back home there is no longer anything attractive. The people have become so modern. I went to the cemetery and weeded the parent's graves. They were covered with weeds. Most of the people there are strangers. I was happy to come back and the sisters had missed me. Liese did not even want to let me go.

Your sister Susan

The apparent normalcy of the correspondence during this period is misleading. It is the period of the so-called "Great Terror." Susan is careful about the content of the correspondence because of censorship. She prefers using postcards and talks mainly about everyday family affairs. On one occasion she dares to add: "Peter was arrested during the night". No further information is forthcoming concerning his whereabouts.

Except for the arrest of Peter the purges of 1937-38 seem to have little effect on the daily life of the sisters. Susan has seasonal employment at the fruit canning factory. The shift work is not easy and there is pressure to fulfill the required norms. In the off-season Susan does day work. Liese and Agnes find domestic work in well-to-do households. In 1938 Agnes secures a job in a confectionary factory, then at a clinic. Even the sister-in-law manages to find work in the local pharmacy. Their expectations are simple. They are happy as long as they have the health and strength to work. Sundays are special days: there are visits with friends and loved ones. Refugees from the Molotschna villages have, it seems, established a small but vital Mennonite community in Melitopol. The food supply is apparently adequate: there is little concern with its availability or its price. Though their accommodation is modest, they are content. Happily they do not know what lies ahead.

You loved ones over there:

We received your letter. We were already waiting for news from you. So you've moved. We hope you have a nice place. We here have our hands full. Agnes is at her old job. I will start work on May 26. I leave in the morning at 8 A.M. and get home at 6:30 P.M. We have not heard from brother K. for a long time, nor from sister Anna. Brother P. works from early until late. He has aged in the recent past and resembles father. . . I would so like to work in a garden but its not to be. I am content with what God has decided. Do we really need anything more? We received your

parcel on February 19. Many thanks. We are so happy for the clothes.

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

2

Wednesday, May 5, 1937

You loved ones over there:

Wishing you the best of health which, thank God, we also enjoy. We received your parcel on April 30. Many thanks. It was so completely unexpected. Liese thought it was the [dress] material but I told her it could not get here so quickly. Thank you especially for the lard. There was also rice, porridge and sugar. It was a wonderful Easter gift. I am at home today and want to go and notify the factory that I will work again this year. Liese will take my place as a domestic. She wants to take my place when I leave and so I told her that she had to start some time. It is not hard work, but it tends to be dragging. You're all alone all day long. Now that its warm one can sit outside. There is always some work to do. My employers are very good people and I enjoy it there, though the income is very low. When one thinks of the long winter one has to earn what one can. My prayer is that God will give me the strength and health that I can earn something. I have been sick for so many years and not been able to work.

Today is a lovely, quiet day. The trees have almost finished blossoming. The potatoes are coming up and vegetable greens are already being sold. . . .

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

3

Saturday, May 29, 1937

Dear loved ones over there:

Yesterday I received your card from May 6. Thank you. We were already very anxious for news from you.

Things are very busy. The days seem to fly by. . . Agnes is still doing day work and looking after the old lady. She thinks she can't leave there. Liese is at the house where I was for two months. They did not want to let me go but I went anyway. I'll be working in the canning factory. . . I start work on June 1. I will be sorting cherries. One has to be quick at it. I wonder if I'll be able to do it. Well everything has to be learned and this as well. During cherry picking I was always on the highest part of the tree, just like 25 years ago. You know me, I always loved to climb trees.

Today I'm home alone. Liese is at work. I have already washed, dried, ironed, cleaned up both rooms, fixed the floor and even cooked a bit of food. Tomorrow is Sunday and we all have a holiday. Agnes is coming to visit us.

When the parcel arrives I will write a long letter. Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

4

Sunday, June 13, 1937

You loved ones over there:

Since the next batch of cherries is not quite ripe I have the day off. Tomorrow it will be very busy. . . . We work for 7 hours. We're divided into 3 parties with a one hour break between each shift. . . I like the work a lot. The two sisters are not very happy with me. They think its terribly hard work, but I laugh at them. . . Each day I pray to the Lord that He will give me strength and good health to do the work. . . .

The parcel has not arrived yet.

Your sister Susan

December 30, 1937

Dear loved ones:

I wanted to answer your previous letter but one often loses the courage and enthusiasm to write. We are well except for dear brother P. We're not sure how he is getting along. The children are going to school. Their holidays begin tomorrow and last until January 13. The children all bring home good marks. Little Peti is innocence itself. When he sees his mother cry he comforts her and says: "The Lord Jesus will help us again". . . . We stand at the brink of a new year. We know what the old one has brought: a great loss for our dear sister-in-law and her children. Brother Peter was arrested during the night.

With warmest greetings,

Your sister

May 10, 1939

You loved ones over there:

We wish you all the best with this letter. . . . The trees have almost finished blossoming. There could be a lot of fruit. I have already applied for the job I held last year. I will probably begin sorting on May 25, but I'll have to be quick. I like the work even though its difficult at times. I'll be alright as long as I remain healthy. Agnes wanted to work as well but she finds it difficult. Liese is highly regarded by her employer. They do not want to let her go. Address the letter to Liese in the future. It is better for me.

Wishing you all the best.

In love,

Your sister Susan

Sunday, April 9, 1939

You loved ones over there:

With this letter we wish you the best of health, which we too enjoy. We received your card of March 11 on April 3.

We are always busy from morning until late. Agnes wraps candy and packs cookies into boxes. She enjoys it, but then when she comes to her household she has to work until 11 or 12 at night for there are always new demands. She is tired of it but we can't do much to change it. . . Today she will get home about 5 P.M. After all it is a holiday. I made some patties in the pan, cooked three eggs for everyone, fried half a kilo of meat patties, and so our holiday meal is ready.

Liese has a difficult job. She has to look after the entire household, cleaning and cooking food. There are three of them and each one wants something else. Then there are two dogs and she has to cook separately for them. . . .

And what about me? What should I say? Its all I can do to keep going. I have felt so tired of late. In my household I have to carry water a long way and do the entire wash. This was not discussed when I started. I find this very difficult because I am not that strong and my back can't take it. The food is very poor. The problem is that the lady is very depressed and the worst aspect of her sickness is that she feels everything costs too much and so she does not feed herself or me properly. I have not gone there for a whole week. One day I cleaned our rooms, one day I washed and on the third day I went to the clinic to get glasses for I could only read with the greatest effort. . . the others sat and read and I sat beside like a dummy. The glasses were ready yesterday and today I have been reading. Now after a long time I'm finally writing. The left eye is weaker than the right. Now I'm finally a human being like all others. . . .

Currently we're having warm weather. The trees are beginning to bloom. There could be a lot of cherries, apricots and pears if it does not freeze.

I don't feel well today. My chest hurts. On the way I met the sister-in-law Liese and she said I shouldn't go to work. Well I want to stop in any case, the work is simply too difficult. Sometimes the woman is impossible. . . .

Brother Kornelius has probably gone home. At least we think so because everything we have sent him has been returned. We thank God for this. How lonely he must have felt, blind and all alone. Now he is free of all pain and earthly suffering.

The sister-in-law is working in the drugstore. Things are going well for her. Lieschen is studying diligently. She is the best student and gets a scholarship of 64 rubles per month. Leni and Peti do not do as well. Leni likes to do hard work and the boy likes to play on the street with his friends. He has to be kept to the books, but is obedient and comes when mother or Lieschen calls. Marianne is the best student in her class and gets the best marks. She is always active, reading, writing, drawing or sewing. She is a lovely, happy girl. In one week the goat will have a kid and the children will have fresh milk again. . . .

Well and what are you all doing? The little boys are no doubt soon grown up. And you're working in the vegetable garden. Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

8

June 13, 1939

You loved ones over there:

With this letter we wish you the best of health and strength for your work. I've hardly had time to think I'm so deep into work. I have to try to make the norm. Yesterday my name was on the achievement list. I sorted 144 kilos in 7 hours. At that pace you don't have time to think about much. I like the work and the supervisors are very satisfied with my work, so I really can't complain. Today I have to work the second shift, 3 to 11 at night. By the time Else, who works at the weigh station, and I get home its one o'clock. Until yesterday we worked nine consecutive nights. That was exhausting. . . .

Both sisters are very busy. Liese at home and Agnes at the confectionary factory. One day after another passes and time seems to fly. As long as the Lord grants us our health we'll make out all right. . . .

Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

July 16, 1939

Today is Sunday but I'm not in a Sunday mood. My heart is so heavy. We want to change residences and the separation from Else makes my heart sad. Else went to the bazaar. She is also very sad and depressed. There is the separation but also her son, who causes her much anxiety. Nothing good will come of him if there is not a strong male hand. She will miss me and my services badly. I clean up, patch her clothes, wash and cook. In short she will miss me and I her. She has such an optimistic character. Today we're going to work the second shift, 3-11 P.M., and will get home around 1 P.M. I have earned 10 to 12 rubles per day, but then I'm very tired. I've sorted up to 816 kilos of apricots into 7 kinds in 7 hours. That gives you some idea how quickly we work. And you're still very busy. You don't even have time to send a card.

Wishing you all the best.

In love,

Your sister Susan

Wednesday, August 9, 1939

You loved ones over there:

With this letter we wish you the best of health which, thank God, we also enjoy. We moved to our new fine quarters on August 5. It is a large room with a hallway a separate entry just for us. Two older German spinsters by the name of Rempel, are our landlords. They wanted to have us in the worst way and we wanted to help each other where possible. I found it difficult to leave Else, but Liese and Else did not get along and so it was time to separate. She thought that circumstances might bring us together in the future and then we could faithfully help one another again. She is such a dear person.

Liese has a long way to walk, yet her employer does not want to let her go. I don't know what will happen in winter. We want Agnes to move home with us but she thinks she can't leave her lady. . . .

I seem to be a fixture at the factory, at least I think I can't leave there. . . We're working at two shifts now. I and Else are on the second shift, the one from 3-11 P.M. . . . At present 25 women

are sorting cherries into 7 categories. The norm is 150 kilos in 7 hours. For this we get 5 rubles, 33 kopecks. For pitting cherries there are about 55 women. The norm is 50 kilos in 7 hours. . . . The women are all in white coats and caps which we get when we arrive. . . .

Our sister-in-law has a sore leg and yet has a long way to walk to her place of work. The children are healthy and have grown considerably. They help their mother a great deal. In another two years Lieschen will be able to earn enough money so that her mother will not have to go to work. Leni has to attend school for one more year, then she wants to study, as a pharmacist. Marianne wants to become a seamstress. She loves to be all dressed up. I don't know what will happen to the lad, he only likes to play on the street. We are already eating tomatoes, watermelons and melons. . . .

Wishing you all the best.

In love,

Your sister Susan

11

January 21, 1940

You loved ones over there:

With this letter we wish you the best of health, which we also all enjoy. We have had no word from you for a long time. We got your last letter of October 8 on December 1. We're still very busy. Agnes in the clinic, Liese in her household and I at home. The days seem to rush by. We had one week of very cold weather, up to -38°. We heated day and night. . . . Liese's employer died in the hospital on December 30. Now there are only the two ladies but they are terribly demanding. Agnes has an easier time of it. I'm also very busy but tomorrow I want to take the day off and go visit Else. I want to walk to the city and bring Agnes her lunch. I'll visit with the landlady and then Sunday will have come and gone. . . .

Please write. Wishing you all the best.

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

12

February 15, 1940

We got your last letter on December 1. Since then nothing has come. Please write. We have a very cold winter with much snow, rain and frost. . . .

What are you all doing? Gerhard is probably studying diligently in school and writing with his left hand. The two little ones are no doubt bouncing about in the room. We would so enjoy having a long letter from you. Liese and Agnes send their warmest greetings. . . .

Our sister-in-law is working and the children are studying diligently, especially Lieschen. She will soon be a real support for her mother and the other children. She is a courageous girl. . .

We have a nice, warm room.

In love,

Your sister Susan

13

Thursday, March 27, 1941

You loved ones over there:

With this letter we wish you the best of health and best wishes for your birthday. We think we have received all your cards. We got your last one from October 6 on February 12. Somewhat earlier we received the one from November.

And what are you doing? Working in the greenhouse? You have also moved again. The children are no doubt back in school. Our children here are so pale. Lieschen is the healthiest. Leni is as tall as I but very thin. Peti is a quiet boy, has difficulty learning and always appears to be so depressed. Marianna is also a pale little chicken. Yet when mother goes to work and the sisters to school she cleans up the room. . . .

Agnes works in the clinic and Liese and I each have our activities. . . Wishing you a happy and blessed Easter. . . .

I remain in love,

Your sister Susan

You loved ones over there:

With this [letter] we wish you the best of health which, thank God, we also enjoy. We received your card of January 11 the day before yesterday. We think we have received all your cards and letters.

Agnes is at work. Liese and I want to walk and visit our sister-in-law this afternoon. When we come home we will pick up Agnes around 8 P.M. and by 9 P.M. we'll have tea. Then the lovely Sunday has passed. On our way there we want to stop at the cemetery and visit Mariechen's grave. That's a bit of a detour. There and back the distance will be some 7 verst. Lieschen has gone to the Ohrloffer hospital for a two month practicum. The other three are in school. . . Marianna is a very diligent girl and gets the highest grades. Peti has difficulty learning but is a good natured lad. He is more like his father every day. We wonder if he the father is still alive.

The ray of hope to "visit" [you] has long been in our hearts. The barometer rises and falls. Currently it is at a high point. The tension almost drives us crazy. Our nerves are shattered. We were so happy that your card offered a glimmer of hope. What are you and the boys doing? A warm greeting from all the sisters.

In love,

Your sister Susan

SOME CLOSING REMARKS

The ray of hope was short-lived. The war broke out and all the Germans in Melitopol were loaded on trains and sent to Kazakhstan and unloaded. They had to dig holes in the ground and with a little wood and earth construct a roof over themselves. There they lived -- starving and freezing. How they survived until 1943 is unknown. It must have been worse than one can imagine. Susan Toews died on July 10, 1943. Liese Toews died on May 10, 1944. Agnes survived and carried water for a tannery. In 1947 she married a widower, Heinrich Warkentin, and in 1947 our correspondence began again. The brothers all perished in 1943. Only David Hiebert who was in Berdyansk and Abram Riediger who was a teacher in Melitopol, survived.

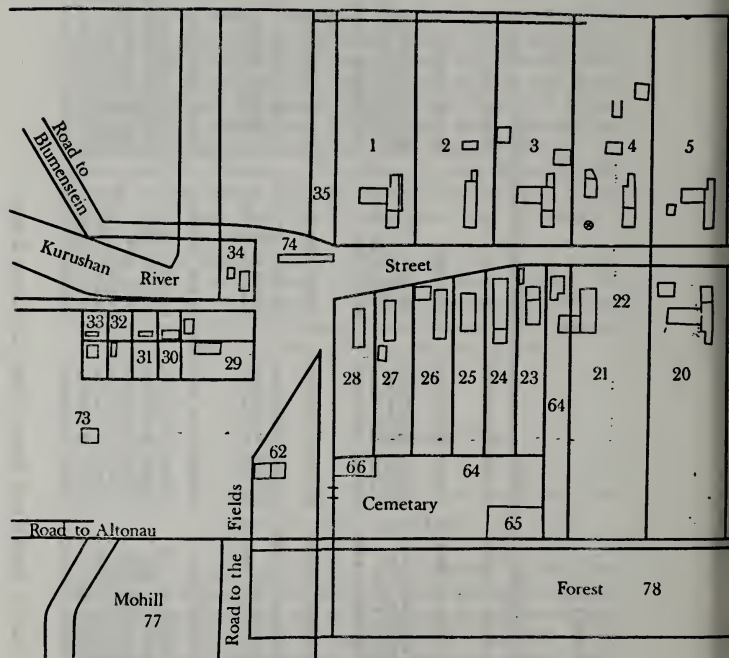
Gerhard Toews

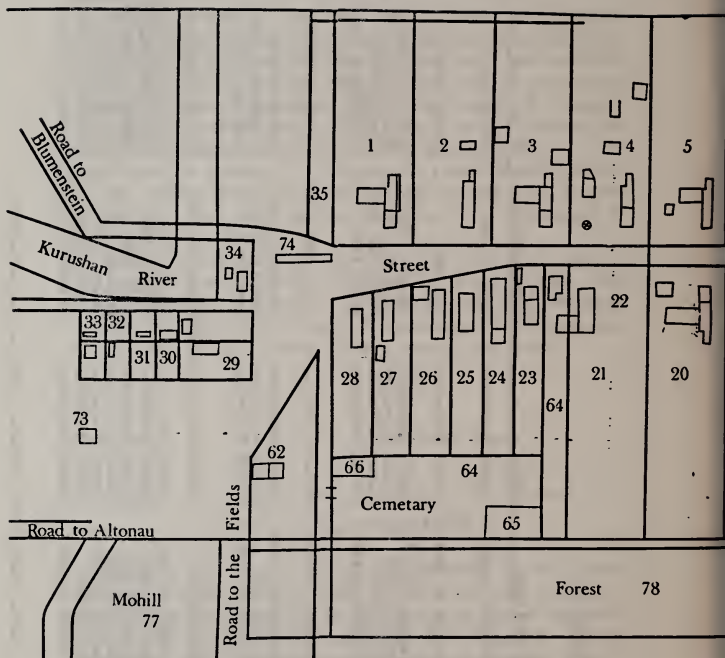
Appendix A

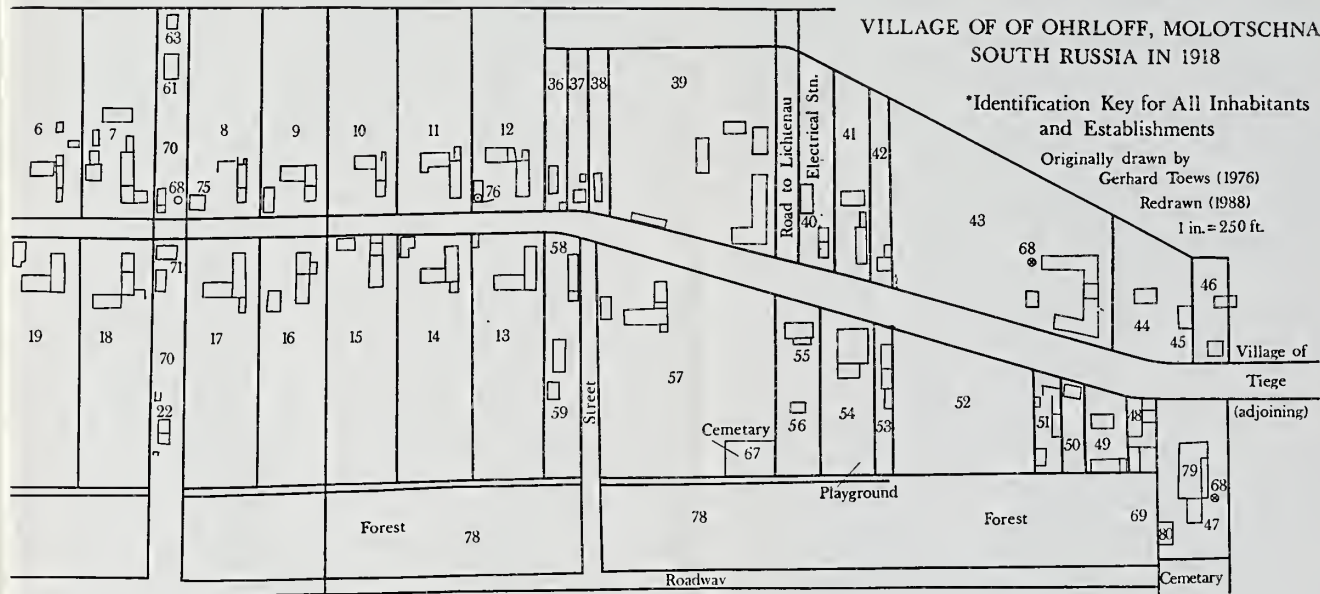
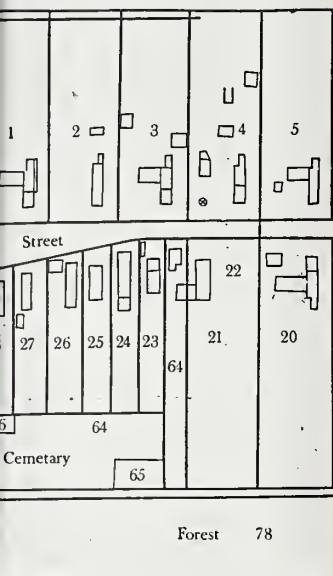
JAKOB W. TOEWS FAMILY

Name	Date of Birth	Place	Date of Death	Place
JAKOB W. TOEWS	February 22, 1847	Ohrloff, Molotschna	April 29, 1933	Ohrloff, Molotschna
Married (April, 1870) HELENA CORNIES	January 24, 1850	Ohrloff, Molotschna	July, 1882	Ohrloff, Molotschna
Children 1. David	February 20, 1871	Ohrloff, Molotschna	December, 1904	Ohrloff, Molotschna
2. Anna	March 13, 1875	Ohrloff, Molotschna	April 19, 1944	Siberian, Concentration Camp
*3. Jakob	March 8, 1877	Ohrloff, Molotschna	January 27, 1963	Vineland, Ontario
4. Johann	December 21, 1879	Ohrloff, Molotschna	May 7, 1909	Colony Marie, Crimea
Married (January, 1883) MARGARETHA BRAUN	February 28, 1860	Blumenort, Molotschna	May 7, 1888	Ohrloff, Molotschna
Children 5. Helena	December 27, 1883	Ohrloff, Molotschna	November 27, 1968	Urchelka, Samara
6. Margaretha	June 23, 1885	Ohrloff, Molotschna	March 5, 1969	Bochringen, Saxony
*7. Wilhelm	October 12, 1886	Ohrloff, Molotschna	November 8, 1966	Leamington, Ontario
Married (August 25, 1888) ELISABETH KLASSEN	March 31, 1860	Muensterberg, Molotschna	August 27, 1924	Ohrloff, Molotschna
Children 8. Elisabeth	October 23, 1890	Ohrloff, Molotschna	May 10, 1944	Karasy Kyetanouskaya
9. Susan	January 1, 1892	Ohrloff, Molotschna	July 10, 1943	Karasy Kyetanouskaya
10. Kornelius	August 22, 1893	Ohrloff, Molotschna	April, 1939	Siberian Concentration Camp
11. Maria	March 28, 1895	Ohrloff, Molotschna	February 23, 1935	Melitopol, Taurida
12. Peter	January 14, 1897	Ohrloff, Molotschna	July 21, 1943	Siberian Concentration Camp
13. Agnes	April 7, 1900	Ohrloff, Molotschna	August 11, 1963	Karasy Kyetanouskaya
*14. Gerhard	October 16, 1903	Ohrloff, Molotschna	September 20, 1984	Leamington, Ontario

*Three brothers migrated to Canada: Jakob in 1924, Wilhelm in 1925, and Gerhard in 1927.







Appendix B

Identification Key for Ohrloff,
Molotschna, South Russia
(Fall, 1918)

1. Johann Koop
2. Johann Mierau (Horse Dealer)
3. Jakob W. Toews (Susan's father)
4. Johannes Wiebe
5. Aron Enns
6. Peter Hiebert (Susan's brother-in-law)
7. Peter Unruh
8. Peter P. Regehr
9. Heinrich Bartel
10. Gerhard Dick
11. Johann Enns (a hunter)
12. Heinrich Derksen
13. David Goerzen
14. Wilhelm and Jakob Warkentin
15. Johann Goerzen
16. David Goerzen
17. Heinrich Warkentin
18. Kornelius Janzen
19. Kornelius Baerg
20. Heinrich Warkentin
21. Wilhelm Neufeld
22. Night Watchmen's Residence (two families)
23. Herman H. Neufeld
24. Arkoff (a Jewish Upholsterer)
25. Gerhard Martens
26. Heinrich Martens (blacksmith)
27. Jakob Cornies
28. Bolgatsch (a Jewish Taylor)
29. Wilhelm Toews
30. Wilhelm Jakob Toews (Susan's brother)
31. Malzev (formerly owned by Johann Haak)
32. Johann Haak (prisoner of war)
33. Jakob Stamm (blacksmith)
34. The widow Penner
35. Vacant (belonged to Johann Koop)
36. Helena Enns (sister to Johann Enns, no. 11)
37. Salome Ediger (teacher)
38. Johann Koehn (worked for Heinrich Reimer)

Appendix B

39. Heinrich Reimer
40. Gerhard Konrad (electrical station)
41. Abram Fast (lumber business)
42. Peter Nickel (teacher and elder)
43. Guenter's yard
44. Johannes Wiebe
45. Silkhouse (owner Johannes Wiebe no. 4)
46. Pharmacy (owned by Mrs. Dross)
47. Hospital (belonged to Guenters)
48. Dr. Peter Dick
49. Blum, a Jew (coach station)
50. Post Office
51. The widow David Reimer
52. Vacant (owner, H. Reimer)
53. Johann Janzen (teacher)
54. High School
55. Ohrloff Church
56. Franz Friesen (church warden)
57. Jakob Schroeder
58. The widow Wiebe
59. Abram Riediger (cabinet Maker)
60. Jail
61. Village Granary
62. Poplavsky (Russian cowherd)
63. Village Police House
64. Village Cemetary
65. Russian Cemetary
66. Jewish Cemetary
67. Village Cemetary (prior to 1850)
68. Artesian Well (in addition to 5 others)
69. Picnic Site (tables, benches and oven)
70. Side Streets (5 in all)
71. Village School with Teacherage and Barn
72. Last Residence of Susan's Father
73. Windmill (owned by Wilhelm Toews, no. 30)
74. Water Tank for the Cattle
75. Heinrich Schulz
76. Located on no. 12. Village Archives were buried here.
77. The Mohill, a Tatar Grave (Entire village was visible from here).
78. Planted Forest (80 years old. Each farmer planted 1 dessiatine).
79. Hospital (for 50 patients)
80. Isolation House for Communicable Diseases (used for soldiers)
81. Doctor's Residence

